

Year C Proper 23 Open the Gift Luke 14 25 to 33

Before we explore this passage together, let's remember that Jesus has been going about the countryside and into communities, preaching the good news that God's kingdom is arriving, he has fed large, hungry crowds with seemingly scarce provisions, he has been healing those who, it was thought, could not be healed, and he has even brought someone back to life. In short, what Jesus has been doing is spectacular. What Jesus has been saying has been hope-giving and inspiring. Massive crowds – full of the adoring and the curious – are gravitating to him, excited and eager for more. He is like a 1<sup>st</sup> century rock star – people can't get enough of him. Jesus sees all of this and decides now is the time to change his tune.

Jesus is on his way to his death in Jerusalem. Many of these people flocking around him are there because of the life he is showing to them. What they are witnessing is the abundant generosity, love, and compassion of life in God's kingdom; the healing wholeness of life in God's kingdom. Jesus has freely given this to them and, of course, they want to continue in this life in the presence of the one who is providing it.

But Jesus needs followers who are truly dedicated to the life in God's kingdom that he is offering...dedicated not just to living this wonderful life when it's handed to them but dedicated to living this life when it *doesn't* come easy, dedicated to living this life among people who don't want it, and dedicated to living this life in order to spread this way of life, to help mend a very broken world full of very broken people. This takes a whole lot of work and a whole lot of change which also means giving up current ways of living that many will not want to give up.

His words today are shocking and harsh. Those who don't hate their family and even life itself cannot be my followers. Those who do not carry the cross like I do cannot be my followers. His intention is to turn away any half-hearted would-be disciples. Jesus is certainly not interested in growing his group simply for the sake of numbers. He wants people to understand the challenges that lie before them as his disciples...it will not be all sunshine and roses. It will be hard work, overcoming challenges and adversity. Both stories he tells the crowd emphasize the need to take the time to think things through before acting impulsively. The builder of the tower and the king about to wage war, both sit and think through their resources and potential outcomes before they get started. And, of course, the examples Luke provides – of the builder and the king waging war – are not coincidences. Jesus is the one building the foundation for the fullness of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. Jesus is the king waging war against the king of this world. He needs his followers to know this, to put themselves in his shoes and make the decision: do I have what it takes to be part of what Jesus is doing?

This is what lies behind his harsh sounding words to hate family and life and the need to carry the cross. When we hear the word "hate", we think of detesting something or someone. Although the word used by Jesus can have that meaning, it also was frequently used in the comparative sense of simply loving something or someone less. This is the use that makes sense in light of Jesus' consistent message of love: love God, love neighbour, love self, love your enemies, love those who persecute you, and so on. In what we hear today, Jesus is not pushing for hostility and violence toward family and life but, rather, we are reminded that we must refuse to allow something less valuable to displace something more valuable. "Jesus is challenging listeners to embrace a singular commitment and

allegiance to him.”<sup>1</sup> It is through this commitment to him that Jesus actually expands on the definition and importance of family: all who hear the word of God and do it, he says, are his family (8:20-21). We are to be loving and inclusive of all people, erasing the lines of discrimination based on social status, skin colour, sexual orientation, gender, and so on. Following God’s ways is all about being a community together. In fact, following God’s ways necessitates being a community – caring for one another, sharing with one another. This is what Jesus is getting at when he says we all must carry the cross as he did.

Notice he says “the” cross, not “your” cross. Over the centuries, carrying the cross changed into meaning each individual carrying their own cross, the burdens of everyday life. A beloved but troublesome child is my cross to bear. Dealing with an irritating neighbour is my cross to bear. Dealing with painful arthritic fingers is my cross to bear. This is NOT what Jesus meant when he told us we must each carry “the” cross. He meant we are to fight the same fight that he did – the fight that resulted in his carrying his cross to his death. Jesus fought against the religious, political, social, and economic structures that created inequality, injustice, and oppression. These structures had been warped to promote the human desire for power and authority, fostering competition, greed, and the yearning for more. These structures blocked and suppressed the fullness of life meant for all of humanity in God’s kingdom – a life in community displaying love and generosity. We are to pick up Jesus’ cross and continue the struggle with him toward the intended perfection...because the cross for Jesus also meant

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<sup>1</sup> John T. Carroll, *Luke*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 307.

something better was coming on the other side of that cross. It is both struggle against and hope for.

None of this is easy. We are, for the most part, quite comfortable with our lives and the way the world works. So are most of the people we know because, truth be told, we hang out with people much like us. We do not, as Jesus did, hang out with the outcasts of society. We certainly want to help others but hang out with them, invite them into our homes for dinner as Jesus told us last week? Some people do. Most do not.

Yet, as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann explains, we live in and participate in an economy that not only *has* homeless persons, we live in an economy that is busy *producing* homeless persons (Brueggemann, *Materiality*, p.xvi). One example was the deliberate government and corporate push for farming to become a global business rather than a local business. Canada feeds people on the other side of the world and receives produce from many other countries around the world. Brueggemann writes, “The illusion of industrial agriculture is that such production could feed the world and indeed must feed the world, because the harvest of local efforts is taken to be too modest and therefore ineffective” (Brueggemann, *Materiality*, p.22). This thinking ended up displacing a great many family farms in industrialized countries despite the reality that researchers have shown that small farms everywhere, in North American and also in the Third World, are more productive than large ones, for multiple reasons (Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture. An Agrarian Reading of the Bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 103-4).

We now enjoy lavish and exotic foods – avocados from Mexico, Brazil nuts from South America, and lotus roots from China. This sort of variety was once only available to the wealthiest and now we reach for these things in our trips down the grocery store aisles. Why? Because we are the wealthy of the world although it may not feel like it. In 1 Kings we read of King Solomon whose daily food needs included one hundred sheep among numerous other creatures (1 Kings 4:22-23). “This extravagant surplus of food,” writes Brueggemann, “depended on the productivity of agrarian peasants who worked the soil for subsistence income. At the same time, this royal practice denied to those same peasants any access to such an extravagant diet.” This may sound disturbingly familiar because we still operate the same way. “In our practice, the wealthy can enjoy an abundance of lavish foods while subsistence workers (on a very low minimum wage) and others who are ‘left behind’ get the leftovers from such distributive practices” by standing in line for a bag of groceries at the local food bank or for an infrequent meal at a soup kitchen. And to make sure these needy people don’t get too much for nothing of our hard-earned abundance, we impose limits on the amount they can take and we make sure they know, at the food banks in the Soo, don’t come back here for more until 30 days has passed.

As a society, we have labeled ourselves as consumers. We believe we have the right and the obligation to consume products – we buy, we eat, we store up. Food waste has become a shameful problem in Canada. We throw over 110 billion pounds of food waste into our landfills every year (<https://madeinca.ca/food-waste-canada-statistics/>). At Canada’s Food Waste Reduction Challenge website, you will be confronted with the shocking statistic that over 50% of all food in

Canada is wasted every year while one in seven Canadians suffers from food insecurity ([Challenge | Impact Canada](#))<sup>2</sup>.

This is just one piece of the world's broken systems and it isn't supposed to be this way. "I am the Lord your God who rescued you from bondage in Egypt and gave you a life of freedom from corrupt and oppressive systems," God says. "I established laws to help you maintain this radical alternative community of equality and love. I came to you, God made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, to teach you, to fight and defeat these systems." Jesus lays it all out for us today. If you want to be my follower, if you want to be a part of dismantling the broken and establishing the perfection of God's kingdom you must give up all of your possessions.

We do not all need to be like Mother Theresa whose total worldly belongings fit into one small carry-on bag. Jesus' extreme sounding words today are all saying the same thing. Seek first the kingdom, turn to God before all else and recognize God as the source of all you need, the source of true joy and love. Jesus is issuing the overwhelming, undeniable summons to engage in acts of love and justice. If one accepts a narrow view of family, if one values life and connection to worldly ways more than the justice and love of God, one will not take risks for the most vulnerable in society; one will not privilege the justice and love of God above social position, wealth, celebrity, and applause. Biblical scholar and professor, David Schnasa Jacobsen, writes, "Discipleship is not just one more hobby or extra-curricular activity" ([workingpreacher.org](#)). For those followers of Jesus who long for the perfection of God's kingdom, who desire to hasten the kingdom through

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<sup>2</sup> <https://impact.canada.ca/en/challenges/food-waste-reduction-challenge>

their words and deeds, this is a tough, seven day of the week job but we do it with God and it is possible.

We often think of people who dedicate their lives to God as being those who literally give everything up and become missionaries in foreign lands or the martyrs who refuse to renounce their faith and are executed for their beliefs. It is normal everyday people who become saints and martyrs. People like us can hasten the kingdom.

Gail in Toronto writes,

The most stressful job I ever had, and the one that I loved most, was being the administrator of a food bank and crisis centre in downtown Toronto. I learned a lot there about the challenges of poverty, the incredible coping skills of low-income people, and the thin line that separates all of us from falling through the cracks. There was so much to do, and never enough hours or hands to do it all. I began working longer each day. I took evening courses to acquire new skills. It was exhilarating – and exhausting.

One of the things that kept me going was the support of the Sisters of St. John the divine. When I reached the point of absolute exhaustion, I knew that they had a room for me at their convent. I would crawl up there on a Friday night, and just eat, sleep, and attend chapel. The sisters celebrate the Holy Eucharist every day. I can still hear the high female voices chanting the psalms, praying for a variety of needs local and international, praying for me and for my work. As we moved forward to receive the bread and wine, I felt that our prayers, our work, our fatigue, and our commitment were an offering just like the bread and wine. I knew that I was part of a great family; a community of believers, who were somehow joined and strengthened through sharing in the eucharist. And when I left on Sunday evening, I was stronger and ready to go back into the fray....

[Sharing in the eucharist has] made me aware that I am a member of a family that stretches around the world. When I receive bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, I am present at a giant dining table, where all come to eat, to be forgiven and refreshed, and to be sent out into the world to be the hands and feet of Christ." (*Living the Spirit of Eucharist*, Michael Thompson, p.9-10).

That's us. That's who we are. That's what we do. Each one of us is able to choose to dive more deeply into relationship with God in Christ, to live more fully into what it means to be a disciple, to consciously strive to live the ways of God's arriving kingdom, to expand God's family, carry Christ's cross, and give up all our possessions. It is a difficult path. It is counter-cultural and hard to do in 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada. When Jesus spoke the words, "Follow me," into your life, it was roll-up-the-sleeves-and-work time. But it was also a gift. Struggle against and hope for. Let's open the gift.