



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 7, 2025
DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20; PSALM 1; PHILEMON 1-21; LUKE 14:25-32

IT'S EASY TO MISS GOD AT THE TURN OF A CIVILIZATION

Luke 14:25-32 *[Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."]*

A few years ago, I was invited to attend a Jeffersonian dinner, so named for Thomas Jefferson with the objective being that the conversation around a table of eight or ten people would not degrade into a cacophony of side bars about the weather, vacation plans or current events, but instead would be guided by some central question of erudite quality sufficient to garner everyone into one collective conversation. I recall the dinner was

lovely, and the exercise of intellect stimulating.

But for the life of me, I cannot remember what the question was, or what anyone had to say in particular, myself included. Not sure what that says for my aspirations to erudition.

I do remember the host's invitation to each person attending to supply brief biographical information in advance of the

dinner, so that it could be shared with the group.

I remember it being an exercise in ego and anxiety for me listing my achievements: degrees earned, years practicing as a physician, ordained a priest, serving as rector and dean. I am sure I added husband and father to my essential attributes of identity I wanted to share.

I remember one other person simply submitted three words for their biography: child of God.

What an instructive moment for me! If there were to be a post-mortem epitaph written for me, I should hope that would suffice: “child of God”... or maybe “follower of Jesus.” The rest runs the risk of vainglory.

I think this is at the heart of Jesus’ teaching in the gospel this morning: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Two things to point at straight away: first, the Greek word translated “hate” here intends nothing of the modern notion of emotional disgust which the word conjures for us. *Miseo* means to prioritize less than something else, to regard as less. With a little license, an alternative translation would be to say: *Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and*

mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters.

Secondly, it’s worth noting Jesus is speaking to the large crowds that have begun to follow him, smitten by his miracles of healing. He’s not speaking privately to the small crew of bedraggled disciples who have left everything behind to follow him. He’s speaking to the masses who do not yet understand that his path is not a dalliance of confused priorities; it is not a walk in the park; it is the path of losing one’s life in order to save it.

If I were to ask you sometime later today or this week to write down ten nouns that help define your identity, what would you write? What are the roles in life that are most important to you? And how do you prioritize those roles in your life?

I will confess I struggle with this theoretical exercise every time I think about it, which is about every three years when this hard reading from Luke’s gospel comes around in the lectionary.

I immediately want to rush back to the familiar safety of those things securely in my possession: priest, physician, American, Christian, husband, father, grandfather. Nothing bad there, but it doesn’t pass muster with this directive from Jesus on the nature of discipleship.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams has written extensively on Being Disciples. That’s the title of a book well-worth reading, if you’re interested. *Being*

Disciples. He says discipleship is a state of being, not just the decisions we make or the courses we take. In Jesus' day, following a teacher as a disciple was an all-in affair, breathing the same air, going wherever the teacher chose to go, leaving behind everything else. There was nothing intermittent about it. We have something to learn from our spiritual ancestors.¹

The point is, Rowan says, that if you're going to be where the [teacher] is, "those things you think come naturally and comfortably are not necessarily going to be where you find yourself."

Being a disciple of Jesus involves unconventional attributes like hopefulness amidst the chaos, embracing mercy as a way of being, modeling forgiveness, practicing holiness (which means to see ourselves as sacred, set apart for a purpose), and practicing presence (honing our spiritual senses to see God).

Discipleship is about striving to grow in those skills that help you not miss God. Like a bird-watcher, Rowan says, the disciple hones awareness and expectancy by sitting still, poised, alert, not tense or fussy, waiting till something extraordinary suddenly bursts into view.

The Welsh poet David James once wrote "it is easy to miss God at the turn of a civilization."²

It feels like we are at the turn of a civilization, and whatever expressions of faith we may have in society in such chaotic times must arise from the slow ferment of being disciples, a way of being, not a string of reactive decisions. It must arise from following the teacher who offers a different way, subversive even to the ways of the world. Those things that come naturally or comfortably may not be where we find ourselves if we really follow Jesus.

The good news, friends, is that we don't have to go it alone; we don't have to have it all figured out before we set off on the next leg of the journey. Here on this Homecoming Sunday, when we celebrate the life of this cathedral community, the Body of Christ gathered here and now... here on this Homecoming Sunday, when we rededicate ourselves to the journey of discipleship, we trust that making the pilgrimage together is a source of solace and strength. The ministries, programs, forums, prayer groups, and all that helps shape our common life here are intended

¹ This and the other references to Rowan Williams are drawn from his book *Being Disciples* and from a lecture he presented on the same topic in 2007, which can be read at <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/being-disciples-2007-conference-rowan-williams/>

² As cited by Williams, <https://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/articles/being-disciples-2007-conference-rowan-williams/>

to help us hone our capacity to see God and follow Jesus.

At the turn of a civilization this journey will surely take us to unfamiliar territory, but if we can really follow Jesus and embrace this life of discipleship, letting go of ego and anxiety, or at least prioritizing

them less alongside our truest identity—child of God, follower of Jesus—then perhaps we will unfold to the beautiful discovery of God-shaped change suddenly bursting into view.

That's where I want to go! And I want to go with you, dear friends.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!