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**Proper 18, Year C, Luke 14:25-33, 8 September 2019**  
**Saint Barnabas Episcopal Church, Bainbridge Island, WA**

"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..."

"...[N]one of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

It was almost a year ago that I last stood here before you to preach the Sunday sermon. I don't expect anyone to remember it (I didn't myself), but just like today, I began by quoting Jesus from the gospel reading for that day: "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off...If your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out..." Are we seeing a pattern here? Today, we have more hard words from Jesus, words that are hard to understand, and words that are hard accept at face value. In fact, when I ponder the words I just read from today's gospel, I almost despair. If discipleship means hating one's family, hating our very lives, and if it means giving up not some, but *all* of our possessions, who among us can claim to be a true disciple of Jesus? Are we destined to utter failure as followers of Jesus? Surely, that is not what he intended for his disciples or for us. So, then, what should we make of these sayings?

We could perhaps gloss over them and try to argue that Jesus didn't (couldn't!) really mean what he so plainly said—he was using "Rabbinic hyperbole," we might think. Or, perhaps, like Saint Francis is said to have done, we could take them to heart quite literally, walk into the street, and strip the very clothes from our bodies as we give up both family and possessions in one

dramatic gesture. However, before I advocate for either of these extremes, I want to do something else this morning. I want to try to understand how those Jews around Jesus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century might have understood his words. If we can do that, we might have a better or, at least, a more nuanced way to apply these hard words in our own lives.

Jesus is asking a lot of his disciples—that's obvious—but for now let's concentrate on the two main things he asks them to renounce, family and possessions, and take these one at a time. When we hear "family," we naturally think of the same list Jesus gave us; namely, father, mother, spouse and children, and siblings. And, yes, family in the Judaism of his day (and even today) means that, but also so much more. The Jews as a people gained much of their identity from their connection with Abraham, a connection that established them as the chosen people of the One God. So, the notion of family for them wasn't limited to what we might call the nuclear family or our close blood relatives; rather, their family extended in space to the Jewish nation as a whole, including the Diaspora, and it extended in time from Abraham to all those in the future who were yet to be born into Abraham's family. And for all their differences, in a time of great national stress under Roman occupation, family was one of the things that held the Jews together as Jews. It marked an extremely important social and even political boundary—national and perhaps in some sense "racial." It was a boundary that was a central part of Jewish identity. And Jesus was asking his Jewish disciples to renounce this connection—or, so it seems at least. We'll come back to this.

In the same way, when Jesus asks his disciples to renounce all their possessions, we in our contemporary western understanding hear this as

renouncing our private property—perhaps our homes, our stocks and bonds, or our many, many, modern conveniences (God forbid, maybe even our smart phones!). But in Jesus’ day, the primary possession, the primary mark of wealth and status, was land. The few rich Jews at the top of the social hierarchy had a lot of land, but most peasants also had a small plot on which they subsisted (there was virtually no middle class in that society and there were many who had been forced off their land and marginalized, but that’s for another sermon). In any case, the point is that land in Israel was not considered private property in our sense of the term; it was Holy Land, given by God to Jews as their inheritance as children of Abraham, and thus it was never willingly sold or given away—not to fellow Jews, and especially not to Romans or other non-Jews who had occupied Israel for hundreds of years. And, again, Jesus told those who were following him, if they wanted to be his disciples, they must renounce their connection to the land. If these sayings seem hard to us, they were perhaps even harder for those Jews listening to Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

So, what was Jesus trying to get across to them in these seemingly impossible demands, demands that seem to us, if we dare say it, so “un-Jewish”? We must always remember, as gentile Christians 2000 years removed from Jesus’ earthly ministry, that Jesus was and remained a Jew. No place that I know of does Jesus renounce the connection of himself and his people to Abraham, and no place that I know of does he renounce the special connection Jews had to the land. What he is doing, as a Jewish prophet in the context of Roman oppression and occupation, is saying something like this: “My Jewish brothers and sisters, the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the symbols of Israel’s identity, see NT Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 367-342, and especially pp. 398-405 on family and possessions.

kingdom of God is at hand, but it's not coming the way you expect; it will not come by violence or a military overthrow of the Romans. So, if you think your family connections to Abraham and your connections to the land that God has given us will save you from the Romans, you are sadly mistaken. I am offering you a kingdom that comes with love and gentleness, and I'm offering you a new family that is centered on me and that will fulfil the promise to Abraham to encompass not just all Jews but the whole of humanity. At that point, the entire earth will be 'Holy Land,' and all will share in the blessings we, as Jews, now enjoy." In other words, Jesus is asking them to renounce their connection to the traditional nationalistic understanding of God's kingdom that family and land symbolize for them; indeed, he saying that if they don't renounce this connection they will surely perish when the Romans respond to the coming insurrection.

Those were hard words for Jesus to utter and they were hard words to hear. But now, I want to ask what relevance they may hold for us, gentile Christians who may appreciate the Jewish environment in which Jesus lived and taught, but who are also far removed from it in time and space. The clue to answering this question is given, I think, in the connection between family and land to Jewish identity. I don't have time to unpack this in the depth it deserves, but, briefly, Jesus is posing a question to them, and to us, as disciples: On what do we base our individual and collective identities, and how might these identities keep us from following God's call to us in Jesus? Here, I'm thinking of our societal roles (parent, child, profession), our socioeconomic standing, but also other aspects of our identities (sex, gender, race, education, family environment), all of which we only gradually become aware of as we grow psychologically and spiritually—and all the things to which we cling when we describe ourselves. Our

spiritual leaders tell us that the ego we form over the years—with many aspects of which we are quite proud and to which we are quite attached—is the very thing we must eventually let go of, that we must renounce, that we must “dis-identity” with, if we want to grow.

I didn't discuss it above, but perhaps the hardest thing Jesus said in today's gospel was that we must give up life itself and take up our individual crosses if we want to be his disciple. This may mean the obvious, that we must be willing face martyrdom for Jesus and the kingdom, but he may have also meant this more subtly, namely, we must give up our very identities to find a new life in him, to be born again, to be born of the Spirit, to be born from above—Jesus said such things in many ways, but his point should be getting clearer by now.

Like the Jews who listened to Jesus that day long ago, we too hang our identities on things other than our love of God and neighbor, and we do this even while we know that we should have no other gods before the One God—be they stone idols, family name, our wealth, or the titles and degrees hanging on our walls. At the end of the day, Jesus asks us to give up our attachment to *everything* for him and the coming kingdom, even our very lives, our very identities. And, the most wonderful part of this strange, hard request is that, when and if we do give up our identities, he gives them right back to us, though transformed and with a richness we can barely imagine until we experience it. There is nothing better than knowing and experiencing the presence of God, and we only know this as we renounce all the false gods and constructed identities that keep us from this truth. This is the promise that Jesus holds out to his disciples. He asks much, but he promises much, much more. Amen.