

## Follow What Leader?

Luke 14: 25-35

Cradock Presbyterian Church

September 8, 2013

There are things you *are* in life, or you're not. You're either asleep, or you're not. I know, some people talk about being "half-asleep" – but if you heard what I just said, you're awake. If you didn't, and things got kind of dark and comfortable, you were asleep. Even if only for a minute. You're either pregnant, or you're not. You can't be "a little pregnant." You *are* a person who's able to carry a tune, or you're not. You're married or not, you're employed or not, you're alive – or not. Yes or no! No middle ground!

One last one: when it comes to our faith, either you *are* a disciple of Jesus Christ, or you're not. I think this passage from Luke could NOT be more clear about that. There is no middle ground when it comes to Christian discipleship. The examples Jesus uses hammer the point home, and for some of us, lots of us, they're hard to hear.

What exactly *is* discipleship, then? It means *following* someone. Not just in a physical sense, maybe not *even* in a physical sense; but in a deeper sense. It's about modeling, learning, and sacrificing – and about teaching others to be disciples, too. It's about commitment on more than an intellectual level: it's about giving up your very being, what defines you. You're now defined as "one who follows" that someone, that leader. For a Christian, you are "one who follows Jesus."

You might ask, "How do we follow?" It begins by coming to Jesus, and giving ourselves to him. Many translations of this passage hide something: that the original language of our passage has Jesus saying "come to me" in the first part, and then

“come after me” later. Some translate both parts “follow” instead, which is inadequate. It doesn’t make it clear that it’s *Jesus* who sought us first. Discipleship begins when we submit ourselves to the grace of God, when we come to Jesus Christ, answering his calling. It gets better when we accept that gift of eternal life he gained for us, and become friends with Jesus, and therefore followers. Once we do that, Jesus leads us. It’s that simple! You know we can trust Jesus. You know he’s not gonna lead us to wrong places. So we just follow where he leads.

“Great!” you say. “Then I guess I can pack my bags and all my stuff and load up and go to Jesus. I wonder if he’s got cable?” It’s not that easy! You have to be changed. Then the question is, either you *are* or you *are not* a disciple! Jesus says something here that has caused people quite a lot of trouble over the years because they’ve taken it too literally. He says whoever does not “hate” father and mother and sister and brother and even wife and children can’t be his disciple! Now, he didn’t mean to literally disown your family. No, this is meant to be a list symbolizing *everything in your life*. He even adds “your very soul” to it, soul getting translated as “life” in most translations. His point is radical, and powerful, and lays before us the most powerful either/or: either get rid of everything, or be left on the outside, as a *non*-disciple. Either change completely, lose your identity and identify with Jesus – or not.

Does he mean *everything*? Why? Verse 27 tells it all, if you ask me. “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” If you drag all that junk from life in this world with you, he seems to be saying, you won’t be able to

carry your cross; and to be my disciple, you must be able to carry your own cross, because no one else can do it. Then come right behind him.

You might be thinking, That's a hard thing. Can't I just try it a while, and see how it goes? Then, when I know how it's going, maybe I can sell off *some* of the stuff I have. Maybe I can just, you know, put everything in storage!" Jesus gives us a couple of examples that strengthen, that clarify, his point. If you were going to build something – he uses the tower as an example, because it would be so big and important – you'd estimate the cost first, so that you'd be able to finish it. Otherwise, you'd get the skeleton up, and maybe some of the outside; but when you ran out of money you'd have this thing sticking up above all the other structures, unfinished, as a testament to your failure. The moral to this first story is to make sure you're ready before you make the commitment to be a disciple, otherwise you'll be doomed to failure. Count the cost!

Good advice! Yeah. But then why does the king in the second example give up before he even starts? The king is able to see that this war is an undertaking in which he cannot succeed. If he tries to go to war when he knows he doesn't have what it takes, when he knows he's not ready, he'll likely lose his crown, and maybe – probably – his life. So he shrewdly maneuvers to make sure he doesn't even begin a war. The message from Jesus seems clear: If you know you can't succeed at being my disciple, if you know you don't have what it takes, don't even begin!

Then, are we doomed, if we don't have what it takes? If we're unsure of ourselves? If you take it that way, then who could possibly be a disciple! I bet some people asked Jesus that very question. I think his point then was, Wait until you are

ready to make the commitment fully, then do it. Don't do it halfway, like the tower-builder, or you'll have a mess. In time, the king could have recruited and trained another fifteen thousand men; then he would have the upper hand and could go to war. The one who wanted to build the tower could have saved up some more money, and built the tower at a later date. Don't do it halfway! Don't start anything you can't finish! – especially the job of being a disciple.

Some of you might have caught something in the text, if you read carefully. You might have noticed that Verse 33 seems to shift a bit. It says that 'none of you can be my disciple who does not give up all of his own *possessions*.' Is it just the material things, then? It's literally "all the belongings to you." That includes even your *identity*. If you would pick up your cross and follow Jesus, then you would put aside your *self*, even your ψυκη, your very soul, as in verse 26 – and replace it with a new identity: "disciple of Jesus Christ."

And that's where the title of this sermon comes from – "Follow What Leader?" Groups get their identity from their leader, as well as their direction. If the leader is a cutthroat, as in a Hitler or Stalin, or a mob boss or gang banger, you know what the followers are going to be like. *Our* leader defines *us* as those who care intensely about others: about the poor and downtrodden; about justice and fairness; and about doing what God wants us to do in the world. *Our* leader is the one who gave total commitment to those things, and in fact was so totally committed that he gave up his own life, just as he called on his disciples to do. So to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is all about total commitment, about following this leader's example of total commitment, and trying to

live as he lived. Fortunately, we have our Bibles to give us good insight on how to do that. So we can add “read our Bibles” to the list of things good disciples should do.

Now, you might be thinking, “This is hard! What if we try and then we only do a halfway job?” That’s why I went ahead and extended the reading past what the Lectionary says. I realized that the last couple of verses went with this, because they were Jesus’ commentary on what happens if you make a half-hearted commitment to being his disciple. If you dig into this story, it’s simple. Salt in Jesus’ day was not like salt we have. It was very impure, kind of gray, mixed with dirt. You would sift it, or maybe boil it, to extract the salt flavor. Eventually, you’d be left with this grayish-brownish gunk that wasn’t salty. It was just trash, so you’d throw it out. Jesus was saying: It’s salt and it’s good when it’s salty. If it isn’t salty anymore, you don’t even call it salt, you just call it dirt, and you throw it out on the dirt path. You can’t put the “salt” back in it – so it’s finished. You’re either salt or you’re not – in this case, with all the saltiness out of it, it’s not salt. Since Jesus has been talking about discipleship, let’s apply the principle to that, shall we? If you start out being a disciple, but you’re not very “disciple-y” anymore, will you still be called “disciple”? Or will you just be thrown out on the dirt pile as “un-disciple-y”? You’re either a disciple or you’re not. Is all the “disciple-iness” out of you? Are you still a disciple? Or are you not?

That’s the question we have to fight with, as we decide whether or not to be, or remain, disciples. See, I think most of us have already decided we want to be. And I believe that unlike salt, which can’t be “re-salted”, we can increase our “disciple-iness.” We have to check that “disciple-iness” level every day, just as surely as we check the

gas gauge in our cars. How's your level? Have you given up enough to keep your level good? Who is your leader? And where are you going? I think you know. God be with you on your way.