September 4, 2016

Luke 14:25-33

So here’s my confession--having wandered into Martial’s office on Tuesday--told him I wasn’t really “feeling” the whole “preaching-from-Luke-14” thing this week--the verses we’re about to read… He said, “Why not?” I said, “Well, you know--the whole hate your mom and dad thing!” He said (and I quote): “I love that passage!” Really? Apparently his favorite preacher--somebody other than me--gave him some great insight into this text, recently… Well, fine—you preach it, then! Just a little collegial skirmish around the water cooler… ☺ But Martial did challenge me to stay the course--so here we are… If you would turn with me, then…

Somebody once suggested to me that Jesus wouldn’t have made a very good local church pastor in the contemporary American church --wouldn’t have lasted two months in the job. Talk to church growth experts and they will tell you--tell you that the pastor’s job is to create a safe, caring environment in the church, right?--a place where people believe their concerns will be heard--their needs met. The idea is to find out what people are looking for and give it to them--and do so in a way that they’ll decide to stay rather than to keep on shopping for the church down the street… That’s the gig.

In fact, it’s an effort to please (and do the whole marketing thing) that doesn’t stop once people have settled in, right? A good pastor will work hard to make sure the worship is satisfying—make sure the educational ministries are appealing--make sure there are plenty of opportunities for fellowship--for service--should probably have good coffee—nourishing snacks (better yet, donuts!)… See, a well-run church is like a well-run household—a place where people can count on regular meals, in pleasant surroundings, and with folks who generally mind their manners…

Now, there’s nothing inherently wrong with that picture—certainly those are values worth striving for in a church. The only problem is that along comes Jesus, right?—comes telling us we can’t be his disciples unless we hate our families, carry our crosses and give up all our possessions. Really? See, the deeper we get into the gospel, the more troubling his message becomes. It’s enough to make us wonder why we don’t just--all of us, we preachers and you-all alike--why we don’t just turn in our resignations here and now--because clearly, none of us has what it takes. In fact, if Jesus were in charge of the average American congregation, I’m guessing there’d only be about four people left on Sunday mornings (and as for those four, well, they’d be fooling themselves!). I mean, can’t you just hear Jesus meeting the newcomers at the door--says, “You sure you want to do this--follow this way of life? It‘ll take everything you’ve got--has to come before everything else that matters to you--because all kinds of people have started out without counting the cost--and, as you can see--well, they aren’t here anymore. So why don’t you just go on home--give it some thought--because I’d hate to have you get in over your head.” That’s Jesus as **Head Usher**--the complete opposite of a good pastor--because far from making it easier for people to follow him, he’s gotta go off pointing out how hard it is…

Now, I don’t happen to think that when Jesus says stuff like this he’s trying to threaten us. I mean, as strong as his words are, here, Jesus loves us--always does he love us. But here’s the deal: Jesus refuses to love us by lying to us--by making his way sound easier than it is. There’s no bait and switch with Jesus--he just wants us to know--to know crystal clear--what it costs, so that no one will follow him under false pretenses. Is being a disciple of Christ about being good, stable citizens, or is it about changing the world? Is it about creating a safe, stable environment where people’s needs are met, or is it about living such a different way of life that those in authority get mad enough to do us in? Ernie Campbell, one of the great old-time preachers, once asked, “If I’m following Jesus, then why am I such a good insurance risk?” Good question…

Now, before you get up and walk out (and I’m not sure what we’re still doing here, frankly!)—but before you get up and give up—before I do--at least listen to a couple mistakes we can make when we hear these really, really hard words of Jesus--mistakes that can cause us to miss out on what he might have for us, this morning... Fair enough? The first mistake is to try and water down what he says—to try and photo-shop the message--make it more palatable—try and add a spoonful of sugar--make the medicine go down—try and get him to say what we want him to say… That’s one mistake we can make, for sure…

But there’s a second mistake, and that is to think that somehow we’re supposed to live this way all on our own. Do you ever think that--that being a disciple is something you have to both figure out and then do by yourself? Well, let me tell you something: nothing could be further from the truth. Nowhere in the gospel does it say that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is a solo flight. It’s why, when we end our service here at Park, there are two parts to the Scripture we quote--yes, “I can do all things though Jesus Christ who strengthens me,” but even more important, we say what? “We can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens us.” (And I know you’ve noticed it, but we always say that second part more robustly than the first part—because we get this at Park Avenue! We’re in it together…)

So, no watering down--no solos--but there’s one more mistake we can make--and that is to think that being a disciple of Jesus--all this keeping him first and living beyond ourselves and getting in on changing the world--that somehow we’re supposed to figure that out once-and-for-all—to get *good-to-go/all-day-every day*—to get it down pat--for the rest of our lives--no looking in the rear view mirror--no two steps forward, three steps back--that somehow we just arrive at this life lived for God. And again, nothing could be further from the truth…

One night, Julie and I got to go over to the University of Minnesota and hear Wes Moore speak. Wes Moore is a young man who rose from a challenging childhood in Baltimore--raised by a single mom who was widowed when Wes was just three years old… Having experienced significant academic and behavioral struggles, he overcame them--graduated from Johns Hopkins University--became a Rhodes Scholar--a White House Fellow--founded an organization for youth in Baltimore--for kids in the criminal justice system. He wrote a book--entitled *The Other Wes Moore[[1]](#footnote-1)*--written after discovering that a young man his same age--somebody who’d grown up just a few blocks from him--a young man also from a single-parent home--also with every kind of socio-economic challenge—a person who even had the exact same name as he did--“Wes Moore”--was in prison serving a life sentence for murder. And that (seeming) coincidence--of similar life circumstance and sharing a name--compelled him to write to the other Wes Moore--to begin a correspondence--to subsequently visit him--and (eventually) they built a relationship with each other--one that tried to answer the question of how two kids from such a similar place in life could end up in such vastly different worlds. The book became an instant New York Times bestseller, and God has been making a difference through those two Wes Moores and their story ever since--provoking and inspiring people to do difference-making things all over this country. He says this about his friend, the “other” Wes (that): “The chilling truth is that his story could’ve been mine; the tragedy is that my story could’ve been his.”

And I was struck, in listening to him speak--there in that standing-room-only University Hall on a Friday evening—struck by his opening remark. He said, “I have yet to meet anyone has not been in need of a second chance.” He said, “If you’re here tonight and you have never needed a second chance in your life, I would love to meet you, because I have never met anyone like you before.” And hearing that, I was reminded that when Jesus decided to build his church, he built it on a second chance. Of all his followers to name as the rock on whose life and witness the church would be built, he chose Peter--the one disciple whose failures--more than any other--were the most spectacular--Peter, who slept when he should’ve been awake--who overpromised--who under-delivered--who said he’d never leave his Lord’s side, and then denied him three times when it mattered most--this impulsive, brash, rash, inconsistent follower became the Rock... It means, my brothers and sisters, that God does not choose the undefeated to do his work in the world—God chooses people like Peter--and people like me, and people like you, and people like Wes Moore (who is not reticent to share his failures in life, too)—God has chosen the likes of us to accomplish his purposes in the world... God chose **us**—we who have (as the writer of Hebrews puts it) the confidence to come into this sanctuary only because of the second chance made possible for us by the blood Jesus shed for us on the cross—he chose **us** to take an unwavering hope into this hopeless world, chose **us** to be the provokers of good in one another (as painful as that is sometimes…).

It’s what’s always been true of our Lord’s church. Go back 200 years in American history--read about the great revival sweeping this country--it was astonishing what was going on—revival meetings being held by evangelists--people like Charles Finney--where in one series of meetings alone--a revival in Rochester, New York, in 1830--some ten percent of the entire U.S. population at the time-- was reported to have come to the altar to accept Jesus as Lord of their lives. But what was distinctive about that remarkable movement of the Holy Spirit, was the all-kinds-of voluntary organizations that sprung up at the same time—organizations committed to social change. It meant that when you got up from your knees at the “Mourner’s Bench” (as they called it)--got up to begin your new life as a disciple of Christ--somebody from one of those voluntary societies was there to sign you up for kingdom work--organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society, the American Moral Reform Society, the American Temperance Society--any number of groups battling everything from child labor to prostitution to alcoholism to gambling addiction. In other words, when you were changed and rearranged spiritually, you were also changed and rearranged in your interactions with your community and your world. Your second chance with God meant that costly grace in your life resulted in obedience and servanthood--didn't matter whether you were Methodist or Baptist, Calvinist or Armenian, Reformed or Episcopal. The slogan that emerged to unite Christians in their work for a new world was this: "Doctrine divides/Service unites." Whether doctrinally you followed Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Knox or Fox--those who joined hands and walked together in solidarity to serve the needs of others--found they could accomplish remarkable change in the world: the abolition of slavery, the 15th Amendment (giving black males the right to vote), the 19th Amendment (giving all women the right to vote), the Civil Rights Acts—those changes all came about to great extent because of the united work and committed actions taken by people of faith whose doctrinal understandings were quite different from one another.

And for me, it begs the question: Have we grown so enamored with itemizing the number of issues Christians disagree about that we have grown indifferent to all that unites us? See, Jesus may not have made a very good local church pastor, but he made a terrific savior, and I don’t happen to think he’s through saving us yet. His way of saving us was the very thing that killed him—that cross he ended up on—the one he was carrying long before he ever got to Golgotha. And he’s always offering to share it with us—that cross--to let us get underneath it with him--not because he wants us to suffer, but because he wants us to know how alive you can feel, even underneath something that heavy--how it can take your breath away to get hold of your one true purpose like that... Because even suffering pales in comparison to what God is doing through it--through you, through me--because we are willing to put ourselves in the way of that cross…

**Prayer:** Lord, pry us loose from those lost or marginal causes to which we give ourselves so freely, that we may give ourselves to your purposes, which cannot fail. Counter our desire for wealth or reputation with the passionate urge to serve after the manner of our Savior, Jesus, in whose name and for whose kingdom we pray, Amen.

1. *The Other Wes Moore,* (Spiegel & Grau, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)