

Sept 4, 2022

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Luke 14:25-33

How do we follow?

1. I have a confession to make: I don't balance my checkbook.
 - a. I know, I know.
 - b. My father-in-law was a banker, my father was particularly good at teaching math, my mom was a magician budgeting and saving money.
 - c. I even studied economics in college!
 - d. Ugh, so what gives?
 - e. I used to do it. Really, I'm serious.
 - f. I also used to keep large envelopes of receipts for all sorts of expenses (for 7 years!).
 - g. But then I got complacent, especially since I started using personal finance software (Quicken) more than twenty years ago (it basically does the balancing for you) and even more when I started to do my banking with online and mobile tools, including writing checks on line.
 - h. When still in school or at your first job, when every penny counts and you want to be sure you don't bounce a check, the motivation was stronger to keep those records in order.
 - i. And it's not like pennies don't count now, they do! It's just that maybe it feels like I have a handle on things, like my type of planning and budgeting works.
 - j. I feel like I have a handle on what it takes to run my finances.
 - k. Until, that is, when an unexpected expense, or several, fall on my lap all at once and a credit card (or cards) get a real work out.
2. Jesus wasn't talking about balancing checkbooks, but he was indeed talking about the careful planning and reality check of what is needed to follow him.
 - a. Up until this point in his ministry, people had been awed by him!
 - i. He had healed people and taught with eye-opening stories
 - ii. He had also challenged the established order, in favor of people on the margins
 - iii. He was even eating and connecting with those in poverty, those discriminated against
 - iv. But as the crowds grew who wanted to be a part of the movement, it seemed a little casual, and it may have been clear they weren't exactly doing the math of what it meant to follow
 - v. They wanted to follow – but did they know what he was asking of them?
 - b. So Jesus uses harsh even shocking language to say this: It's harder than you think. So, plan accordingly.
 - c. To follow, Jesus would argue, is not a hobby or a passing fad. You have to be all in.
 - d. That could get uncomfortable if there are others in our circle who are not on board
 - i. If you're the first in your family to become a vegetarian, you can go to a restaurant with them and you just order a different dish than they would.
 - ii. But following Jesus may put you in conflict with your very loved ones.

- iii. Here I wished Jesus didn't say "hate" your family, but here you have it. I'd suggest he is saying that pressure from them to prevent us from following is to be opposed, hated even.
 - e. You can imagine the reaction Jesus got!
 - i. Wait, I didn't know my following you meant I had to let go of relationships if they weren't on the same page with me!
 - f. Well, that's not all, said Jesus: if your possessions possess you, and keep you from following, then get rid of them, too.
 - i. Jesus was speaking with people of means or at least with some means
 - ii. Jesus had just been talking about inviting the poor to eat at their home
 - iii. Do the math, and if things keep you from following, let them go
 - g. Carrying the cross is a daily decision. You have to check that spiritual balance not monthly but daily to be sure you're still all in.
- 3. Jeremiah prophesies with equally harsh language about what it takes to follow God's ways
 - a. In that passage God was angry (I don't think Jesus was angry with the followers)
 - i. The people of God had done the opposite of following God
 - ii. And so God offers a visual object lesson: a potter at the wheel with clay
 - iii. Clay needs help. Without the physical shaping, it's just a lump
 - iv. But in the hands of a talented and relentless potter, it becomes a beautiful vase or a work of art
 - v. But clay can be temperamental, so if it is not cooperating with the potter, the potter can rework it to reshape in the right way.
 - b. I feel discomfort with the image of forceful shaping of us as followers by God, and yet I appreciate that in the example the Potter God is willing to work with the human clay who accepts the opportunity to do what is right.
- 4. It is not always possible to know what it will take to follow Jesus, not fully.
 - a. Getting baptized, or becoming a member of a church, and really committing to following the example of Jesus, honestly sometimes it may feel like we're not really sure what we've gotten ourselves into.
 - b. Going to seminary, deciding to become a pastor: I didn't know what it would take!
 - c. And I think that's the moment Jesus is talking about.
 - i. It is then that other forces will try to drag us away from the difficult daily decision to carry the cross, to bear the full consequences of acts of selfless solidarity, of courageous service, of prophetic critique of sinful systems at work all around us.
 - ii. We know that when we talk against structural racism, there will be people who will want to minimize that reality, or try mask its lasting and pernicious impact.
 - iii. Even more so when we try to do something which calls for personal changes and sacrifice. Some will come willingly because they feel the need for change, but some will not
 - iv. As we have posted the position for a new Director of Children, Youth and Young Adults, which Marietta held for seven years, we have gotten some hate mail from people who decry our stance in support of LGBTQ people in our congregation and community.

- v. It is truly disheartening.
 - vi. And yet it serves as a reminder that the work of justice we do in this community is threatening to some, even to the point of anger and hate.
5. Look, maybe you balance your checkbook once a month.
- a. Maybe you watch what you eat to keep your cholesterol in check.
 - b. Maybe you do all that because you know it's the cost of staying solvent and healthy.
 - c. Well, what Jesus is saying to us today is that we daily need to make a decision to take up the cross, that is,
 - i. to take up the counter-cultural, theologically upending work of the Realm of God as he himself has shown us:
 - ii. to be in relationship with people pushed to the margins because of poverty or prejudice,
 - iii. not to let our possessions or position or privilege be obstacles to serving God but rather that they be tools we use for ushering in the Realm of God!

Sources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-luke-1425-33-5>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-luke-1425-33-4>

Reflection Questions

1. Share a story of when doing the right thing or following Jesus brought you into conflict or tension with others around you.
2. In some translations of the bible, our gospel passage (Luke 14:25-33) is titled the cost of discipleship. For you, what are some of the costs of following Jesus?
3. How would you explain the concept of a Christian "carrying the cross and following Jesus" to a person from another religion?