

TEXT: Luke 14:25-33  
THEME: Jesus' call to discipleship  
SUBJECT: Counting the cost  
TITLE: Coming to Jesus

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Two weeks ago we heard Jesus say, "I have come to set fire on the earth. Do you think I have come to establish peace on the earth?" Yes, we thought you were the Prince of Peace. "No," answers Jesus, "I have come to bring division, father against son, mother against daughter, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law."

When I was young, very young, I remember a story told in a hushed tone around the Sunday dinner table of another Sunday dinner table. Anger erupted between father and son. The father stood up from the table still dressed in his Sunday shirt and tie, rolled up his sleeves, and "boxed the ears" of his son. Father and son in a fist fight after church at the Sunday dinner table. I wonder what the sermon was about that day?

Last week we heard Jesus berate the host of a lavish dinner party for indulging in class privilege, for neglecting the poor and the hungry. If you have ever prepared even a modest dinner party, you know how much time, money and energy is expended. How rude of Jesus to show so little respect and even less appreciation.

Moreover, Jesus scolds the boorish behavior of the other guests. I have been invited to a few dinner parties through the years but never been tempted to challenge the host's choice of guests. Well, that's not true. Occasionally I have dined with folk who made me wish I was at McDonalds. But it wasn't my party.

Despite Jesus' disregard for social norms, great crowds continued to follow him. Maybe they followed because of the antisocial behavior. Maybe it was an early version of a reality TV show where the common person vicariously luxuriates in the privileged getting their due. If so, they, the crowd, are about to experience what it is like to "dressed down" by Jesus.

Jesus turns on the large crowds following him saying, shouting I imagine if he is to be heard, "Unless you hate your father and mother, brothers and sisters, spouse and children, unless you hate your own life, don't bother following me."

Wherever did James Dobson get the notion that Jesus was in favor of family values? Jesus dismissed his own mother in front of a crowd, distancing himself from his family of origin, declaring his mother and brothers to be those who did the will of God.

If anyone in the crowd, perhaps someone not on speaking terms with her family, persisted in following Jesus, he turns up the volume: "Unless you give up all your possessions you cannot follow me." Jesus sounds like a man who wants to be left alone, which in the end he is, abandoned by all his disciples and feeling abandoned by God.

The church has worked overtime to domesticate this Jesus, to make coming to Jesus a walk down the aisle, a verbal confession of sin, a half-hearted declaration of faith, a casual commitment to be nice. The cross is not something each of us has to face, but something Jesus bore for us.

I am perplexed by folk who sing, loudly with feeling,  
 Jesus is the sweetest name I know,  
 And He's just the same as His lovely name,  
 And that's the reason why I love Him so;  
 Oh, Jesus is the sweetest name I know.

I wonder if they know the Jesus Luke describes? I am exhausted by this Jesus. I have had differences with family members, but I don't hate them. I have witnessed the heart wrenching pain that comes with irreconcilable conflict in families. It is not pretty. As far as I have seen no one wins, everyone is diminished.

What do we do once we give away all our possessions? Then what? Where do we go? How do we live?

You may remember the movie "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil." The plot centers on a writer from New York City who tries to understand a group of rather eccentric residents of Savannah, Georgia. Their penchant for understatement is striking. The film/novel is set in the 1980's. A woman refers to the Civil War as "that recent unpleasantness."

When an intruder interrupts a fancy dinner party firing a pistol at the ceiling and brandishing the jagged edge of a broken whisky bottle, he is flatly appraised by dinner guests as "a colorful character."

A man sentenced to federal prison for embezzlement is said to have been snared by "a little accounting issue." While all of this makes perfect sense to the locals, the visiting New Yorker is not privy to unspoken cultural assumptions and he remains mystified.

As the citizens of Savannah were masters of understatement, the rabbis of first century Palestine, we are assured, excelled in hyperbole, bold exaggeration for dramatic effect. What a relief! We don't have to carry a cross if we want to follow Jesus. We can let him go it alone, as he seems to want to do, go home and enjoy Sunday dinner and football.

Jesus led a possessionless life and spent most of his ministry in the midst of the poor. Jesus' call of disciples seemed to require total relinquishment of possessions. Yet, after the crucifixion, Peter and the other disciples return to their homes and to their fishing boats. What are we to make of this?

Jesus sees property as gift not as commodity. The ultimate justification of property is that it serve the fullness of life in community. Property has essentially to do with social relationships and should be used to ensure the participation of each person in life-giving community.

Property as commodity easily becomes idolatry. Idolatry is being possessed by a possession and thereby refusing God's claim on oneself and shrinking one's responsibility toward others in the community. Idolatry is the loss of freedom.

Before the market economy converted us to consumers, we knew that life is for doing, gifting, and the practice of virtue rather than just getting and maximizing. The good life, according to Jesus, is not the acquisition of ever more goods for consumption. The good life, according to Jesus, comes from the sharing of resources to ensure each person has the means of flourishing.

Coming to Jesus calls for more than a walk down the isle. It calls for a conversion of our way of life.