

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
9 September 2007, Proper 18, Year C
St. Margaret's Church
Mark Wm. Wastler
In God's Grace

Fixing and Following: Luke 14.25-33

It is good to be with you again. My sabbatical was just what I needed it to be. I feel refreshed, relaxed, and ready. I am grateful to the parish, and to whoever wrote my contract, for the opportunity to have this summer away. I will share more about my sabbatical next week during the adult education time.

One of the reasons my sabbatical was so good was because I did not worry about what was going on here at St. Margaret's. I had complete confidence in our staff, lay leadership, and the Holy Spirit. I am truly grateful to Dina, James, Pat Hall, and Nancy for all of their hard work over the past three months. Their ministries are exceptional, and we are blessed to have them here.

I would especially like to thank Stewart. Not only did he continue doing his own ministries, but he took on a significant number of my responsibilities while I was away. It was no small burden on him, and he met all of the challenges with grace, good humor, and wisdom. We are fortunate as a parish to have such outstanding leadership in our associate rector. Thank you, Stewart, for all of your hard work. I am grateful for the gift you gave me, and to have you as a colleague in ministry.

Someone told me this story last weekend at a rodeo of all places. He leaned over and said, "Did you hear about the preacher who went on sabbatical?" I thought it was an odd question to ask while we were watching someone get tossed off the back of a bull.

Apparently, a preacher went off on a sabbatical for three months. He came back raring and ready to go. He was excited to get at it and start changing people's lives.

On his first Sunday back, at the end of the service, he said, "I just want you all to know that I am here to help you in any way possible. If you need anything, just ask."

A man in the congregation raised his hand and said, "I am having some problems with my hearing." The preacher had the man come forward and he put his hands over the man's ears and said a fervent prayer, ending with, "Hallelujah!" He stepped back and asked the man, "Now, how is your hearing?" The man said, "Well, I don't know, it is not until Wednesday."

So much for post-sabbatical expectations.

Let's look at the gospel together for a while. I wonder what you were thinking when you heard this passage from Luke read a few minutes ago? Were you thinking what I have been thinking for the past two months since Stewart mentioned to me in a phone call that this was the gospel reading for my first Sunday back?

Is Jesus crazy? He is totally contradicting himself here. If this passage does not sit right with you in your gut, then, you have done some good work at interpreting a hard passage. This is one of the hardest passages in the gospels. When we come to passages like this one, we have to bring to it what we know from the rest of the scriptures, from our theological convictions, and from our tradition of interpretation.

If we do not bring all the rest of what we know to these kinds of passages when we interpret them, then we are left with an extremism that is most unhelpful, and Jesus ends up being irrelevant at best and inaccessible at worst.

So we put other parts of our faith up against what Jesus says here, and then we do the hard work of listening for the Holy Spirit. We cannot rush this work, or think we know what Jesus is saying right off the bat. We may not be able to intuitively grasp the meaning of the passage.

Jesus says that to follow him, to be his disciple, we must hate our father and mother. We know that the fifth commandment tells us to honor our parents. How can we hate them on the one hand and honor them on the other? Jesus must be telling us something other than the painfully obvious.

Jesus also says that you must hate your spouse if you really want to follow him. We know, however, that in Mark, chapter 10, Jesus says some strong things about the sanctity of marriage. He says that husband and wife are one flesh, and that what God has joined together no one should separate.

At the end of the passage he adds a real zinger. He says, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” What about all the talk in the scriptures about stewardship, about using our material resources for the common good? What about the just and proper use of all creation? The bible says more about stewardship, about taking care of things, than it does about renunciation.

Jesus is teaching people about following him. He is obviously saying that there is a cost to discipleship. When you decide to follow Jesus you might stress your relationships, and you might experience financial hardship. He gives us good advice. He says it is prudent to know what you are getting into before you commit.

So, being a disciple does not mean that we terminate all of our closest relationships. Nor does it mean that we give away all that we have and live in poverty. We can all breathe a big sigh of relief.

Jesus is saying something to us that might be harder to hear than what first hits us in this passage. The deeper message of the passage is: Do not expect some body or some thing to fix you. Only God can fix you.

Being a disciple of Jesus, being a person who lives in relationship with God means that we are continually being fixed. We are moving toward wholeness, toward healing. Our lives are being changed by God's love; our lives are being put back together.

Too often, we make somebody other than God responsible for our healing. We put somebody else or some other thing in charge of our happiness. Most of the conflicts that we experience in our relationships, whether they be with spouses, parents, children, church members, partners, or friends, most of the difficulties are because that other person is not doing what we think they should be doing to make us happy.

None of us want to hear this. Most of us will dismiss this possibility out of hand. "I don't do that," we might say to ourselves, or you might be saying it to me in that conversation you have with me in your head while you listen to the sermon.

I want to ask you to consider the possibility before you reject it. Isn't it entirely possible that you have surrendered the responsibility for your happiness, for your emotional well-being, for your healing to somebody other than God?

Jesus' extreme language wakes us up. We load up our relationships with expectations they cannot possibly bear. We expect them to do things they were not designed to do.

Some of us here are over-parenting our children because we want them to be good and successful. If they are good and successful, then we will be too. We are working out our own desires and wishes in their lives, rather than accepting who they are.

Some of us look to our spouse or significant other to give us a sense of self worth. We want them to put boundaries on our craziness that we can't put on ourselves. We want them to give us the love that we never had. We need them to say things we want to hear and do the things we need them to do so we feel good about ourselves.

Some of us want our careers to fix us. We want the power that we feel like we never had before. If we can just be successful, whatever that means, then we will have the recognition of others that we so desperately need and will do anything to get. That so-called success is elusive - always beyond our grasp and it never really satisfies us.

I know what I am talking about because I have the same kinds of things going on inside of me that you have going on inside of you. We are looking to other people to fix us, heal us, or complete us.

Jesus tells us that it is a dangerous thing to put somebody else in charge of our spiritual lives. It is a dangerous thing to expect somebody else to do for us what only God can do. I cannot fix you, and you cannot fix me. I cannot heal you, and you cannot heal me. Only God can do that.

The good news is that when we allow God to fix us, then we are free to enjoy all of those other relationships in ways that are healthy and whole. And, if they are relationships that do not bring us joy, then we can see them for what they are and not for what we need them to be.

The same is true for our possessions. When we stop expecting them to give us something that only God can give us, like a sense of self-worth or happiness, then we can enjoy them openhandedly, sharing them with others for the common good.

Only when we stop expecting somebody else to fix us will we be truly happy and truly free.