

How much to follow Christ...? (Luke 14: 25-33)
Pastor Hubert Den Draak, Pinegrove UC, Sept. 8/13



I've never been to New York city, but I'm told New Yorkers have their own sense of humour. And sometimes tourists can be the unwitting victim of that NY sense of humour, for instance if you ask for directions on how to get to the famed Carnegie Hall. The answer you may get is, "Well, to get to Carnegie Hall you have to practice, practice, practice."

And in a sense they're right! Playing an instrument at that level doesn't just happen like that. It takes a lot of time and energy, it's a big daily commitment. You don't have to be playing Carnegie Hall for that matter. Jill (and also Jack and Jacomyn) always like to know ahead of time what we'll be singing, so they can practice. And when our choir sings an anthem, it's not a spur-of-the-moment-kind-of-thing; you better believe that have committed to come in early before each service, so they can practice.

We live in an area where minor hockey is very important; a lot of (grand)parents drive a lot of children to practice and games every week. But as anyone with a (grand)child in a hockey team knows, it involves more than that: it means having to drive long distances in the dead of winter, starting out long before the crack of dawn to watch your (grand)kind practice or play in a cold rink, and eat greasy fast food for a whole weekend and get home with not much time to get ready Monday - only to do it the next weekend by travelling to some other tournament in some other town. Sounds familiar? But you commit to it because you feel it's worth the cost.

We teach our (grand)children that that if they want something, they'll have to work for it. There's no free meal ticket. It's only by committing to something that you get anywhere.

And what's true now was true in Jesus' day, too. But what does Jesus do? He takes the way people assume things are supposed to work, but takes it a *BIG* step further, to a level no one ever imagined. And then he says: now *that* is what God's kingdom is like; *that* is God's dream for us.

We saw it last week, when Jesus was invited to that fancy society party; and the week before, when he cured the bent-over woman on a Sabbath.

Everything Jesus says and does is about the reality of God's kingdom, and our role in it.

The common people loved Jesus; they loved it when Jesus argued with those uppity lawyers and taught them a lesson. They loved it when he broke the law and told the Pharisees that laws are there to help people, not to control them. They loved it when he spoke out against injustice and hypocrisy, and in favour of the weak, the poor, the nobodies and the misfits. Nobody had ever done *that* before!

So his fame is growing fast, and soon big crowds are following him around wherever he goes. Jesus is the hot new celebrity. Everyone wants to hang out with him and be part of the cool new "in" crowd.

And this morning, Jesus stops and looks at all the people following him (including us) - and gives them (*and us*) a wake-up call. He says, you know, following me may be harder than you like to think. Don't think that you are special just because you like to hang out around me. This is not a popularity contest. This is not about fitting God in when we have time for it in our busy schedules, only to be gone again when something else comes up that we'd rather do. The message is that our lives have to be Christ-like, not just in certain aspects but in *all*.

One of the reasons I like this particular passage is because it shows a very human side of Jesus. You can tell this is something very close to his heart because he actually gets worked up about it. You can tell because he uses an obvious exaggeration just to make his point: "Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters."

Harsh words indeed - if you take them literally. But this passage is not meant to be taken literally. It's a figure of speech to get our attention, to wake us up. Jesus challenges our assumption that our duty stops at our family.

Now just so we're clear on this: this passage is *not* saying that family is not important. Family *is* important. Especially in this day and age when healthy family life is under constant stress by so many outside pressures and false promises, with struggling single-parent families, or both parents working just to make ends meet.

What Jesus is saying here is that the world is always telling us to look out for #1. It's all about me, what *I'm* entitled to, *my* rights, what *I* deserve. And when we have a family, that sense of entitlement expands to include them; but that's where it pretty much stops.

As soon as we have to include outsiders, things can get problematic. It's hard to care for outsiders, especially if they're not like us. But that's exactly what God asks us to do: to look beyond your direct family, and make *all* of God's children

our priority. Our commitments to care are not to be limited to those who are our relatives, or even the people we're comfortable with.

Easier said than done, isn't it? But Jesus is passionate about this, and he's giving it to us straight. He's not sweet-talking us into signing on the dotted line, only to spring the hard truth on us after the fact ("Oh, and by the way, now that you've signed up I'm entitled to your full commitment."). The Jesus we're meeting in this morning *does* demand everything, yes - but he's up front about it.

He compares it to a someone who begins a building project. Now some of us here have worked on building the extra wing to this church, that was a big project and a big commitment. So before they started, they made sure there was a detailed plan and estimate. It's no good to get a roof and windows and doors and wiring, only to discover that you have run out of money! Your friends will laugh at you, Jesus says.

Jesus also uses an image from the political world of one army defending itself against another, also an example where the stakes are incredibly high and where you don't rush in. You think twice.

So Jesus is laying his cards on the table, saying that the life of discipleship is the most important project in our lives. So you better know what you commit to before signing up for it.

There's something else that need to be said here.

We often think that "discipleship" is the same as "going to church", or "church life". But that's not exactly what Jesus is talking about. Going to church and commitment to the Christian community is only a part of discipleship; an important part, mind you, but nevertheless, just a part.

Jesus calls us to weave our discipleship through our entire lives and to let it be the basis for everything we do - not just Sundays, but all 7 days of the week.

Of course we have to work and look after our families and participate in the wider community. And of course we need to plan for the future of this church and nourish our faith community. But all of that is not the reason why we commit to God through Jesus of Nazareth. It's just one small part of it. So even though the world may tell you it's all about you and what *you* want - it is not. Nor is it about your family or your church. It's not even about hockey!

Today Jesus tells us to think twice before saying you will be following him, before saying "I'm a Christian". Because it's a big commitment that comes at a cost. But he also assures us that it is worth the cost, it's worth our time and effort and resources, to be part of God's dream of heaven on earth, to be part of a kingdom of faith and love, of peace and justice.

When we dare to commit to that, nothing else can come even close. Amen.