

Let's Not Be So Quick to Build that Tower [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 14:25—33

Hate is a strong word, don't you think? Whenever I use it (and on some really awkward and rare occasions I do) it's as if I've taken a sledgehammer to a mosquito that's landed on a pillow full of goose-feathers. In other words, it's overkill. It's too much. In fact, whenever it slips out, my spouse, will try to train me, "Don't say, 'I hate lima beans...' Say, 'I don't care for them.' Don't say, 'I hate the Dallas Cowboys.' Say 'I'm not a big fan of the football team from Dallas.'"

No question about it: *Hate* is a strong word—which is why, coming from the lips of Jesus in today's gospel, it sounds abrupt. Scholars, of course, have described it as an example of hyperbole—or an intentional, over-the-top exaggeration, designed to shock us into a new kind of awareness. And I suppose I get that. Luke 14:25 starts out—"***Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus and he turned and said to them...***

'Hey, everybody! I'm so glad you'd like to be a part of this movement. The more, the merrier. And if you'd like a better relationship with your parents, your spouse, your children, your siblings, come follow me.'

But, you see, he doesn't say that. Instead, it's quite the opposite and maybe a little off-putting:

"Whoever comes to me and does not HATE father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

What in the world can he be doing—except contradicting at least one of the Ten

Commandments, the one that chastens us to '***Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you***'? So, where's he going—except to crucifixion, suffering and death?

In the film, *I Heart the Huckabees*, there's a dinner party that absolutely cracks me up. It takes place in the home of this so-called Christian family, where there's a father, a mother, a daughter and a son—plus some kind of exchange student from Ethiopia. And to their table, they've welcomed Tom Corn, who is a fire fighter who's become disillusioned with the damage done to the environment—the warming of the climate—due to fossil fuels. Tom is quiet, a little subdued. But after noticing the large, gas-guzzling SUV in the driveway, he says, “You say you're Christians, living by Jesus principles, but are you?” And here's where the exchange reminds me of today's gospel. The daughter, in defense of the family honor, declares, “Jesus is never mad at us if we live with him in our hearts.” And Tom replies, “I hate to break it to you, but he is; he most definitely is.”

You see, there it is again: the Bible invites interpretation; and whenever interpretation(s) are worked out in community with others, it's not going to be smooth sailing. It's not going to be the Hallmark card version of Christianity—all sweetness and light. And yet, as your interim pastor, one of the dynamics that I cope with is my need to be liked. I want to be liked; and so I'll typically bend over backwards to offer encouragement and flattery and what I say, I mean... until I venture into the sayings of Jesus themselves. I mean, let's be honest. If you really wanted people to like you, to emulate you, to follow you, as Jesus seems to want, you wouldn't tell them to hate their blood relatives; and you wouldn't tell them they have to hate *“even life itself.”* So, here's my appeal: look at the material we have to work with; it's not easy; it's not straightforward; and it's likely we're going to get lost in the rhetoric; Jesus is going to confound and confuse. But it's all a part of the PROCESS. The things of faith are always in PROCESS.

For example, check out how Jeremiah, chapter 18, lays out the situation with the people of Judah. The year is 587 BCE, and very soon, the Babylonian Empire is going to run roughshod over Jerusalem, leave the temple in ruins and send the most prominent priests, the royalty and the scribes into exile. And so, what does the prophet do? He goes down to the potter's house, where he observes the PROCESS by which a beautiful clay jar or a chalice is made. And in verse five, after the potter has given up on his original effort and started over again with a malformed lump of chaotic mud, we read ***"Then the word of the Lord came to me; Can I not do with you... just as the potter has done? says the Lord..."*** In other words, what God intends isn't going to happen over night; there's going to be a process; and at times that process feels like utter confusion.

I don't know if anyone here's a 'project-person'—which is to say, a person who enjoys doing projects. But I have had my struggles. Once upon a time, for instance, we had a cat and we needed a 'cat door'—a little hole with a flap hanging down—to be cut into another larger door. And so, my son and I gathered the materials we'd need; we rented a jig-saw to cut the wood; we unhinged the door and laid it out in our garage. And yes, by God, I swear, we measured and measured again to be sure. And we had a template that we traced. And so we cut the hole and we're feeling proud of finishing the job by dinner time. Sheryl then pulls into the garage and instead of encouraging us, she said, 'You know you've cut the hole on the wrong end!' I said, "No way"—but when we re-hung the door on its hinges, instead of the hole being six inches off the ground, we saw it was six feet off the ground; and in frustration, we imagined the cat could jump it.... Ugh! My point is the PROCESS.

Why do we assume that becoming a follower of Jesus is so easy? That it's simply a matter of saying certain words? Of singing the right lyrics on key? Of showing up at church at least a few times a month? On the contrary—listen to Jesus in verses 28 and 29 and 30:

“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’”

And, you see, what's his point if not the PROCESS. First, consider the cost. The wholeness and the salvation God offers in Christ is not just about going to heaven when we die. Oh, no! Jesus would hate it if we simply believed that, and thought we were done. On the contrary, what God has done for us—in becoming vulnerable to us—in anguishing over us and over all creation—that's cost God something. There are layers and layers of pain in the heart of Yahweh. And if you and I simply acquiesce to that flippantly, “Oh, thank you, God... Now I can get on with watching television, surfing the internet, buying groceries...”—we're not appreciating the PROCESS of the life-on-earth change that God intends to bring about.

Let's pause for a moment and consider all the self-help books that Jesus would not endorse. In 1936, Dale Carnegie wrote his famous book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, but I think Jesus *hates* it. A few decades later, Norman Vincent Peale, published *The Power of Positive Thinking*, but I think Jesus *hates* it. And then, of course, there was the 1970's classic, *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, by Dr. Thomas Harris. But despite the number of copies sold and it's listing on the New York Times Bestseller List, I think Jesus *hates* it. And why? Because *if I'm okay and you're okay*, why is Jesus himself going to the cross?

The cross, the death-penalty, the capital punishment, suffered by Jesus tells us first and foremost, we're not okay. And even if we'd like to go through life, making deals and glad-handing people in big business, we're still not okay. And even if we think positively and try to wish ourselves into all goodness and a life of luxury—don't mark my words—mark the words of Jesus, who challenges anyone who would be his disciple to take up their own cross. And what does the cross symbolize if not the grueling PROCESS of becoming God's own ambassador of covenantal love? And this is where Northwood Presbyterian may want to listen very carefully to verse 31:

“Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace...”

In other words—let's not always look to thrive. Let's not presume 'victory' or 'triumph' in the cultural sense. Let's enter the process. Let's sit down and consider the long-term process in which you and I are being made holy. Let's not be so quick to build the tower, and let's not always look to win the war. Right now, in today's culture, you may have noticed, many of the old churches that once thrived are emptying out, and some are already vacant. A recent Pew Research poll says, “For every six Christians who have left the faith, one has joined...” And the trend, as far as the number of people going to worship, is getting worse. The median age of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is 68 years old and going up. And so, if we were ask Jesus how we might get the crowds we once had here at Northwood, what do think he'd say? The fact that he uses the word HATE the way he does, and that he refers to the affliction of the cross should tell us he's not so much interested in attracting large numbers. On the contrary, his hope is that we become part of the process—and that we will persevere in that process.

Madeleine L'Engle tells the story of a beautiful maple tree, near a babbling brook, in the countryside, where she would go to meditate and pray. A friend of hers from a monastery gave her an icon, with the image of the baby Jesus and his mother Mary holding him, pictured on it. And Madeleine L'Engle placed that icon in the nook of that tree, where she could listen for God's voice as the gentle waters would cascade over the rocks, and where she might cocoon like caterpillar in the process of becoming a butterfly. But imagine her horror as L'Engle ventured toward that icon-tree one day and found that someone had shot it point-blank in the face of Christ. It was horrible. The very place set aside for her to worship had been utterly ruined and desecrated. Could she ever go back there? Would she ever go back? Would she persevere in the process?

Anyway—here's her poem, called *The Icon-Tree*, in response to that question:

As I sit at the shot-at tree
The rough wound opens and grows strange and deep
Within the wood, till suddenly I see
A galaxy aswirl with flame... and the shot child,
Like the great and flaming tree, runs
With fire and water, and alive and wild.
Gentle and strong, becomes the wounded tree.
Lord God! The icon's here, alive and free.