

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of Holy Eucharist
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; September 8, 2019

“For Better, For Worse”

Scripture: Luke 14:23-33 (13 Pentecost C, Proper 18. RCL)

You know the old saying... “When the going gets tough,” **[encourage the congregation to answer...]** “...the tough get going!” Right. Well, maybe... unless you’re trying to be a Christian. ‘Cause it sounds to me like Jesus is saying that when the going gets tough, you might as well give up. And why wouldn’t you? Hate your father and mother? Hate your spouse? Your kids? Your siblings? Carry a cross. Give up all your possessions. Not a particularly encouraging promo spot for building up church membership, you think? But I think, on the contrary, it’s a pretty, well... loving thing to say. And it makes me even more certain that Jesus cares for us deeply. This is a love story, folks, like pretty much every other story Jesus tells. And I’ll tell you why I think that is...

So, we have entered “the season.” No, not the football season. Amelia and I have entered that late summer / early fall *wedding season* that is so highly anticipated at this time of year in Minnesota. This spectacular climate... Not too hot; not too cool. The leaves are still up in the trees, and they soon will shine with all their fall colors.

The light is softer. The breeze is comfortable. It *is* a beautiful season to get married. And couples come to us ahead of time with the highest hopes, professing their love aloud, telling us why they know they are meant to be together forever.

And if Amelia and I are anything worth our salt, we are truly happy for these couples, and somewhere along the way as we are talking with them about preparing for marriage, we find a way to say, “Okay, you sure about all this? Because the road may not be easy. This is ‘for better, for worse’. This is ‘for richer, or poorer,’ you know. We might be talking poverty here. And you might have that fun partner now, but what about when one of you gets sick or sad or confused or unemployed? What about when the kids get old enough to challenge your will and you’re not sure what to do about it? What then? Or what about when the aging parents need you as much as you once needed them, but your spouse needs you too? What do you do? Yes, I ask questions like that sometimes of these couples. I know what they intend. They promise to love and honor and cherish. They promise to forgive and be forgiven. Even though they might have to sacrifice something of their personal hopes and dreams, if necessary, for the sake of their relationship. And they promise to do all this for life... not even knowing what lies down the road tomorrow. How audacious it is to say, “I will” and hope to actually keep that sort of promise. Maybe it would be better to just give up. *You better believe* I want to know that these couples have

considered the cost of marital bliss. Not because I *don't* want them to get married, but because I *want* them to get married... and succeed. I want them to find joy and satisfaction, to be good to one another and fulfill their promises, until they are parted by death. That's a big deal. I want them to be ready... ready as they can be. And of course, these couples say "Yes, we're ready," and they enter into this new relationship with each other. And some of them will not make it, but thankfully that doesn't stop them from trying. They are determined and thoughtful and faithful, and they have made a choice and assumed a risk to live into a promise. That is life in marriage, with all its joys and all its challenges.

And isn't being a faithful follower of Jesus at least something of the same? We make a serious commitment in faith. We make our promises to live as Jesus lived, to love others as we love ourselves, to be church-going people, to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of every human being. We promise to be honest, forgiving, and generous. And we say we do this for life! But, you know, those promises may one day place us at odds with the family. Our parents or sibling or our children may reject our Christian faith. Or we may need to give away a significant part of our earnings and possessions to build faith communities like this one or to help others have the things they need to survive. We may have to leave jobs that require unethical behavior and cause harm to others. We may lose friends who don't

understand why we would give up a perfectly good Sunday morning to go to church. Do we have what it takes to stay the course? Well, here we are, and of course, nearly all of us have said, “Yes,” and we enter into this relationship with Christ, and though he knows that some will not make it, he doesn’t stop us from trying; we are determined and thoughtful and faithful, and we have made a choice and assumed a risk to live into a promise. That is life as a follower of Christ, in all its joys and all its challenges.

So, when we hear these passages today about hating those we are called to love, or giving up our lives and bearing the cross, folding in the face of challenges, or giving up all our possessions, I don’t think Jesus is really inviting us *not* to follow him. I believe Jesus is making sure we understand something of the commitment, something of the challenge we may face, something of the nature of sacrifice that is born by loving others and loving this world. And I believe he does this, because he cares for us and wants what is best for us, and wants us to thrive in a life of Christian faith, even when it is hard.

Jesus tells this marvelous story of the calculating king. But it’s not really a story about war, or a calculating royal ego, or strength of arms. It’s a story about grace and love, just like every other story from Jesus. What king does not sit down and consider

whether he can achieve victory when the odds are sorely stacked against him, Jesus asks? “I can’t beat twenty thousand soldiers with only ten thousand.” But there is something else I can do. I can ask for peace.

And so can we. Life and faith can be tougher than us sometimes, so I understand why Jesus wants us to consider the cost when we decide to walk with him. And thank God, when the going gets tough, we can ask for peace. “God, we haven’t always lived up to the promises of our faith. We can’t always overcome our sinfulness on our own. And life is hard. We don’t always know how to face our doubts and fears, or how to let go our possessions or forego our desires, or how to be reconciled with our families and friends, how to be forgiving, or how to remain hopeful in times like these. We don’t know if we can do this, Lord. Please, we need to ask you for peace.”

You know, the good news that Jesus talks about sounds pretty strange sometimes, because the good news doesn’t always make us comfortable, or certain, or successful, or wealthy, or perfect, or right. The good news means something for the one who may fail in the life of faith, but who tries nonetheless. The good news is that when we aren’t all we need to be, we can ask for peace with God, and we can expect to receive it somehow. The good news is good, because it leaves room for all of us to

follow Jesus as best we can. I don't think Jesus is telling us today to turn back, rather he is honestly telling us what it might take, even as he is inviting us to come along. And when the going gets tough, we may not feel so tough. But keep going. A life of Christian discipleship may not be easy, but there is grace, there is love.