

Choosing Jesus

This is a very special morning in the life of our St. Luke's family. We come back together after the summer's adventures, eager to share our stories and catch up with friends. We also begin the Season of Creation, a time when Christians around the world celebrate the glory of God's good Earth and the beautiful creatures with whom we share it. So, of course, this is the morning when Jesus decides to talk about hate. And no, he's not against it, at least not in this passage. He informs his audience – presumably including us – that we'd better be prepared to hate everyone we love and give up everything we have if we want to be his disciples. Honestly, it's enough to make you want to turn around and go back to the beach.

Theologians struggle valiantly to soften Jesus's words, perhaps because they aren't exactly conducive to increasing church attendance. They assure us that the Greek word Jesus uses, *miseó* (μισέω), really isn't as horrible as it sounds. Yes, *miseó* can mean "to hate, detest or abhor," but they swear that Jesus isn't referring to negative emotion here. (That makes a certain amount of sense. It's hard to obey the commandment to honor your father and your mother if you hate, detest or abhor them, and Jesus was emphatic that he did *not* come to change the Law of Moses.) *Miseó* is also about priorities, and Jesus uses *miseó* so his followers will put aside any emotional attachments that might distract us from wholehearted discipleship. We can love our families; we just have to love Jesus more. Some Bible scholars also argue that Jesus uses hyperbole in this passage to drive his message home. Again, that makes sense, because our Lord certainly wasn't above exaggerating in a good cause. As G.K. Chesterton observed, "Christ had even a literary style of his own....The diction used by Christ is quite curiously gigantesque; it is full of camels leaping through needles and mountains hurled into the sea." Then again, Jesus may just be having a bit of a moment here. The clock is ticking toward his Crucifixion, the religious

authorities are becoming increasingly hostile, his disciples still don't grasp what he's trying to teach them, and the crowds remain more curious than committed. If frustration amplifies his message, who could blame him? There's something to be said for having a God who understands our frustrations because he has experienced so many of his own.

Still, we shouldn't be too quick to water down what Jesus says about *miseó*, especially given what follows. If we want to be his disciples, he insists, we not only have to sideline our loved ones, we have to relinquish our stuff. For some, that may be the heavier lift. Families are made up of people, and people can be very difficult to love. The pricklier or more distant they are, the easier it becomes to tell ourselves that we love Jesus most, especially if we sand off all his rough edges first. When it comes to our possessions, however, we like having nice things, and possessions don't lie, cheat, steal, or talk back. Giving them up can be painful, even if our attachment to them distorts our priorities, distracts us from our relationships, and ties us down when Jesus most wants us to get up and do something on his behalf. Our possessions can also do a surprising amount of damage. Their life cycle, from design to manufacture to shipment to use to disposal, devours resources and generates massive amounts of pollution. Jesus didn't say much about the environmental impact of material greed. He didn't have to, because his people owned very little by our standards, and what they had was largely biodegradable. Even when they overworked the land, polluted the water, or hunted animals to extinction, they didn't begin to inflict the kind of harm on Creation that modern consumerism does. Recognizing that Jesus required his disciples to give up even the little they owned to follow him, we can only imagine what he might say about the heaps of possessions that many of us cling to and the various harms we inflict upon ourselves, each other and his Father's Creation to get and keep it all. If we took Jesus at his word, Goodwill drop-offs everywhere would be crammed to bursting.

When Jesus makes demands on his would-be disciples, it's not that he wants to shame them. He simply knows what's coming and recognizes that his less committed followers won't be able to stay the course. John's Gospel tells us that many of them abandoned Jesus because they couldn't accept his teachings around the Eucharist; if they couldn't handle that, his Passion would have melted their minds. Even his twelve closest friends, whom Jesus had handpicked and who had spent three years traveling and studying with him, ran like frightened rabbits when the Temple police showed up to arrest him. When Jesus talks about builders and kings thinking carefully before embarking on major projects, he's not discouraging anyone. He's just being realistic and encouraging his listeners to do the same.

So, what does this mean for us on Ingathering Sunday morning? Everyone here has commitments outside the church, and few of us are likely to put everything we own up for sale on eBay and donate all the proceeds to the poor. Will Jesus reject us? I don't think so. But I do think he'd like us to think long and hard about why we come to St. Luke's, what our faith means to us and how each of us can help bring his Father's Kingdom a little closer. For context, we can look to Moses and consider the advice he gave to the contentious people he had led for forty long years as they stood at last on the border of the land God had promised to them.

Having offended Adonai, Moses never set foot in the Promised Land himself. That may be why the choice he put before the people was so stark. Knowing he would not be there to guide them, Moses dispensed with nuance and told the people that, in their new life, they could either follow Adonai, obey his laws and prosper, or turn away, worship other gods, and perish. Good or bad, right or wrong, life or death. Moses urged them to choose life, so that they and their descendants might live, loving their God, obeying him, and holding fast to him. If we want to be disciples, we too must choose to love Jesus, obey him, and hold fast to him. That may well

require us to make hard choices, especially when it comes to taking better care of his Father's Creation. For the Earth and our fellow children of God to prosper, we must choose to buy less, use less, discard less, conserve more, share more, and live more lightly on the Earth. We'll need to pay more attention to how our choices hurt those who live in places where resources have been plundered, and trash has been unceremoniously dumped. And we'll have to recover our reverence for Creation as the sacred masterpiece of the Great Artist rather than a pile of resources to be looted, hoarded and discarded as soon as they cease to be useful or go out of style.

If this all sounds like a tall order, take heart. You don't have to do it alone. As Paul wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians, we come to church not only to worship and spend time together, but to encourage each other in our Christian faith. As our communal journey of faith brings us into closer alignment with God's purposes, we become more able to open our hearts to Jesus. The more we let him in, the more our relationship with him transforms our priorities and desires. We start to want what Jesus wants. We lose interest in mollifying people who want to come between us and our Lord and in piling up meaningless possessions. Over time, putting Jesus first and letting go of unneeded stuff can become second nature. And we don't have to do it perfectly. C.S. Lewis put it this way: in the long run, Jesus will be satisfied with nothing less than perfecting us to the point where our Father is as well pleased with us as he is with Jesus himself. And yet, Jesus "will also be delighted with the most feeble, stumbling effort you make tomorrow to do the simplest duty." We can't perfect ourselves no matter how hard we try, but our church community can be a place where it's safe to invite Jesus to do it for us.

Becoming a disciple of Christ is the work of a lifetime, but if there's a better way to spend our lives, I don't know what it is. So welcome back, friends! As we move forward together into the coming months, may we continue to choose life and Jesus together. Amen.