



Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
September 8, 2019

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Cleetus and Lurleen were an elderly couple who lived on a farm way out in the country. Their one big event every year was to attend the County Fair. One year at the fair they saw a pilot offering rides in his bi-plane for \$5 per person. Cleetus was very excited and wanted to go immediately but Lurleen just shook her head and said, “five dollars is five dollars.”

Every year for the next three years it was the same thing – Cleetus wanted to ride in the airplane but Lurleen just kept saying “five dollars is five dollars.” Finally it got to the point that the pilot recognized them when they walked by and one year he stopped them and said, “I’ll make you a deal. Go up in the plane with me and I’ll fly as wildly as I can – loops, spins, dives, the whole nine yards. If you can go the whole flight without screaming or making a sound then the flight will be free.”

So they agreed and squeezed in together in the open backseat of the biplane. The pilot did his worst with every loop-de-loop he could manage and when he landed he looked back to discover Cleetus alone in the backseat. “What happened to your wife!” he exclaimed. “Oh,” Cleetus replied, “she fell out about halfway through.” “Well why didn’t you say something?” “Well,” Cleetus drawled, “five dollars is five dollars.”

Sometimes we’re all a little bit like Cleetus and Lurleen, we know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. In today’s gospel, Jesus is talking about cost and value: the cost of following him versus the value of following him.

The big picture context for this discussion on the cost of discipleship is Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. Along the way he is talking about the contrast between God and humanity, between the way God created the world to work and the ways we have perverted the creation – it’s the contrast between the kingdoms of this world and the Kingdom of God. So, for example, last week we heard Jesus say that in this world the poor and the sick are often ignored and many philosophies may suggest that they deserve to suffer. But in the Kingdom of God the poor and the sick are our brothers and sisters and we are called to be sure that they

are cared for. In many, many ways God's way of living reverses our way and our priorities. God's way of life turns our expectations upside down.

So today we hear Jesus say that the way to belong to a family is to hate your family and the way to enter into the life that Jesus offers is to hate life itself and to take up a cross – that is, to embrace death by execution – in order to follow Jesus. Luke has already said, back in chapter 9, that Jesus has “set his face” toward Jerusalem because the time has come for him to die. And now Jesus is telling us, his followers, we must also set our faces towards this destiny, take up our cross, and follow him.

The temptation comes now to try to wriggle out of it – does “hate” really mean “hate”? Does a cross really signify death? Is Jesus really God in the flesh speaking to us or are these perhaps merely the suggestions of a somewhat mentally unstable self-proclaimed prophet? And here's where Luke becomes a really annoying writer. Just in case it isn't clear, he drives the final nail in the coffin and quotes Jesus saying “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Darn it! Jesus, I can hate my family, but don't tell me I've got to give up my golf clubs, my car, or my playstation 4!

As far as I know, I don't think any of us here today are actually in the process of literally giving up all our possessions. Or are we? A man was on his deathbed and he called his three best friends to his side: a doctor, a teacher, and a priest. He said, “I want to see if it is possible to take my money with me into the great beyond. I'm giving you each an envelope with \$5,000 in it – just before they start shoveling the dirt over my coffin I want you to each toss in your envelope.” The day of the funeral came and each friend tossed in his envelope and afterwards they met at the pub for a farewell drink to their friend. As they talked the doctor said, “I have to confess, I kept \$1,000 of that money to pay a sick child's medicine bill.” Then the teacher said, “well, if we're confessing I need to tell you that I kept \$2,000 to buy clothes for needy kids at the school.” Then the priest said “I'm ashamed of both of you, I wrote him a check for the full amount!”

We really can't take it with us, can we? In a very real and legally binding sense we are all in the process of giving up all our possessions. We are all in the process of leaving our family. We are all on a narrow road towards a narrow door – a doorway called death, through which we may pass but none may come with us and none of our possessions – not even the clothes' on our back – will be coming with us. When you think of it in this way there is actually a sort of very dry humor in today's gospel lesson. It's almost as though the following conversation is taking place outside a movie theater: A 12-year old boy walks up to the ticket window and

says “What’s a ticket to Star Wars worth?” and the clerk says “about 197 million dollars, that’s what it cost them to make the movie.” “What?! I don’t have that kind of money.” “Oh, well, what do you have in your pockets?” “Six dollars, a golf ball I found, and a piece of string.” “Good news!” the clerk says “we just set the price at six dollars, one used golf ball, and a piece of string.”

What Jesus is offering us is of staggering, unbelievable value – beyond anything we could ever afford or achieve. Jesus is offering us life – and not just existence, but an actual life that is worth living, a life that fulfills the very purpose for which we were created – and even though the value of that life is beyond all measure or estimation, Jesus lists the price as exactly the one thing we that we all, every one of us, happen to have: the price is one death, no more no less.

And in his graphic description of that death in today’s parables, Jesus is just reminding us that it’s going to happen to us whether we want it to or not. There’s no escape, there’s no dodging it, there’s no getting around it. We’re going to have to turn away from family, give up our possessions, and go to the cross of death with Jesus. The question is not “whether” but “*how*.”

Will the cross be forced upon us or will we take it up ourselves? Will we be dragged to Jerusalem or will we, like Jesus, set our faces toward it? Will we embrace the family of God or worship our families instead? Will we be dragged kicking and screaming into the Kingdom or will we count the cost, see the value above the cost, and follow Jesus willingly into the Kingdom? Because one thing is certain: the only thing worse than crucifixion is fighting against crucifixion.

A Sunday School teacher was quizzing her class about their knowledge of the catechism. She asked them, “what do we have to do to get into heaven?” and one little boy immediately answered “die!”

Amen.