

LESSONS OF A CROSS-EYED BEAR
Sermon for Pentecost 16C- Lk 14:25-33
LPC, 9/4/16

There is a hymn, not in our Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*, that is not remembered in its own right so much as for a famous misquote and subsequent malapropism of a portion of the third stanza, which goes:

Keep Thou my all, O Lord, hide my life in Thine;
O let thy sacred light over my pathway shine;
Kept by Thy tender care, gladly the cross I'll bear;
Hear Thou and grant my prayer, hide my life in Thine.

Supposedly this song is known by a generation of Baptist Sunday School children as the song about "Gladly, the Cross-Eyed Bear."

We might as well find humor where we can in the concept of bearing a cross, which otherwise is a grim topic indeed. Yet carrying a cross is part of following Jesus, as Jesus himself tells us in today's teaching from the Gospel of Luke.

As I warned you last week, we have entered a part of the Gospel of Luke with some very difficult teachings and problematic parables. I imagine many in this room, including myself, found it hard to get past Jesus' first line, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

Let's see if we can unpack this a little. In the first place, we have here a case of something I mentioned last week: rabbinic hyperbole. This is a didactic method used by the rabbis in which a teaching is exaggerated to the point of absurdity so that even if the dullest students can absorb only a little part of the point, they will at least get part of it. So when Jesus says you have to hate your family he is deliberately overstating to make the point that if you want to lead a Gospel life following him, Jesus, must be a priority in your life, as important as your own family.

Another factor at work in this teaching is the biblical understanding of the words translated "love" and "hate." To hate something, as the expression usually appears in the Bible, does not necessarily connote the violent antipathy implied by the English word "hate." To hate something, especially in the context of loving something else, means not to de-prioritize it, to disregard it, to devalue it relative to something else.

Granted this is still a tough pill to swallow, when we are apparently being asked to devalue our families relative to Jesus.

The fact is, however, that prioritizing our discipleship, living the Jesus life of healing, forgiveness, providing and selflessly loving, makes us better and more loving husbands, wives, parents, daughters, sons, and friends. And that is how and why it makes sense to prioritize our love of God over all else, despite the enormous investment required if we are to really follow Jesus. Carrying the cross is a metaphor for this investment.

This is not the sense in which we usually use the expression, “cross to bear.” The way we usually use that expression is to refer to some onerous situation that we can’t change and have no choice but to endure indefinitely. The “cross you bear” may be a chronic illness or condition, like diabetes or arthritis. The “cross you bear” may be a trying relationship with someone from whom you don’t have the option of dissociating. The two operative conditions of having a cross to bear in this sense are (1) it’s something that causes you suffering, and (2) it’s something you can’t do much about.

But is this the nature of Jesus’ cross? Yes, Jesus’ cross causes him suffering, but it is something he has control over. Jesus willingly takes up his cross. He doesn’t deserve it. The Gospels imply that he might have avoided the cross by simply staying away from Jerusalem that particular Passover season. But Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, knowing there is a cross there for him.

Now, Jesus’ cross, as we know, is not just a cross. It is not just a particularly brutal execution prop. Jesus’ cross represents the burden of sin under which all humanity suffers. If the “sin” language makes you uncomfortable, then think of it this way: Jesus’ cross represents the suffering of humanity. This is the cross Jesus takes on, to lessen, indeed to take away, the burdens human beings carry.

And this is the cross Jesus asks his disciples to bear. I don’t mean that each of us is to take on the sin of the world. That was Jesus’ unique cross. But we are to be like Jesus in sharing, to the extent of our abilities, the burdens of our fellow humans. We are to share each other’s burdens. We are to look beyond our own families, and spare some selfless compassion for those beyond our own walls. As I said last week we are to look upon all of humanity as our extended family, children of our own Father-Mother-God.

This requires more than a casual effort. The parables Jesus tells, about the person building a tower and the king waging war, make this point. Just as the builder and the king undertake to understand beforehand, to the best of their abilities, what the enterprise will require, so Jesus wants his followers to understand that really being a Christian disciple, as opposed to just giving Jesus lip service, requires a major investment: the investment of one’s whole life, in fact. To really follow Jesus, to do as Jesus did to take up the cross of sharing the world’s suffering and to alleviate it, is the work of a lifetime.

This is more of an investment than occasionally going to church, giving to charity now and then and identifying as “Christian” on demographic surveys. Following Jesus is not something to be done casually. This requires self-dedication and whole-hearted discipleship. This requires “choosing life.” The cross will have to be taken up daily, sometimes hourly, when we remind ourselves of what it really is to follow Jesus. p

But Jesus will help. Jesus always carries the lion’s share of this cross’s weight. Or maybe the cross-eyed bear’s share.