

## Proper 18, Year C: 5 September 2010

There's a great saying in the South that goes like this: "That preacher's just gone from preachin' to meddlin'." And that's exactly what the author of Luke has Jesus do in today's Gospel. He goes from preachin' to meddlin'. "If you don't hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, you cannot be my disciple. . . . none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." What could he possibly mean?

This charismatic Jesus gathers followers everywhere he goes because they see him deliberately include the poor, heal the sick, and talk a lot about love.

This charismatic Jesus is now telling these same folks that if they want to stay with him, if they want to be his disciples, they have to give up everything -- family as well as possessions. We could almost imagine his followers thinking, "I liked him a lot better when he was just preaching about love. Leave it there. Don't ask me to change my life." Jesus has really gone from preachin' to meddlin'.

This is one of those tough Gospel passages. It's tough because it's so radical, and it's radical because here Jesus is challenging his disciples to change their lives completely, to put what they say they believe about God before any of their own comforts. It's a jolt to our ears. We may wonder what his hearers were really thinking. Well, strangely enough, if we read into the next chapter, the evangelist tells us that, "all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling." Those who had been marginalized evidently weren't scared off by these words. They'd actually heard them before and seem to have been paying attention.

Chapter 12 of Luke has Jesus saying practically the same thing: if you want to be a disciple, your household may be divided. Being a real disciple is hard work. People may not like you for it. They may not agree with you. And the price you pay may be difficult, may even seem like death itself. All through Luke, Jesus points to the cost of discipleship. All through Luke, Jesus challenges the thinking and lifestyles of his listeners, and many revile him for it. But the tax collectors and sinners kept coming back. Could it be that even though Jesus challenged them and talked about the cost, he never stopped loving them, healing them, and showing them how much they were loved by God? Even when Jesus really gets to the point of meddling in their lives,

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he continues to show them how good it is to live the way God wanted them to live. Jesus was really doing no more than calling them to look again at how they were living their own law-their own Torah. Many of the religious leaders seem to have fallen away from a true living out of their law. Many had let both their material possessions and their desire for power get in the way of living a godly life.

But the tax collectors and sinners kept coming back. Even if they weren't living perfect lives themselves, they certainly understood what it meant to be rejected, what it meant to be oppressed, what it meant to be living a life that came with a cost. Because they kept coming back, they saw that in the midst of the hard times God was still with them. In the chapter before today's passage, Jesus reminds all of them that the kingdom of God was already there, and that the kingdom was like a tiny mustard seed that would grow into so big a tree that the birds would make their nests in it. The kingdom of God would be a place of support for them. "Go out into the roads and lanes, and bring people in so that my house may be filled," Jesus told them.

But we still have that troubling part where Jesus says if you don't hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters-- yes, even life itself -- you can't be my disciple. That word hate just doesn't sound like Jesus. Well, in context, it isn't a call to hate of course but a call to set the right priorities. Putting anything -- anything at all -- before God skews the rest of our relationships. The key to understanding this Gospel is to look first at how we act towards others. We have to look at ourselves. We have to look at our "Torah" just as the Jews did, at the covenant we've promised to keep. Our Torah is our Baptismal Covenant-the promises we make to God at our Baptism. You find them on pages 304 and 305 of the BCP.

This Gospel is easier to grasp if we look first at what we're called to in those promises. They tell us how we should act. If we really live out those promises, we'll find that many of our other relationships fall into the proper perspective. We won't be like the builder Jesus used as an example. We'll have the proper foundation to build on; our priorities will be right. We may even see our personal relationships grow deeper and more solid. There will always be a cost to discipleship, yes, but there is also God's promise of resurrection.

So, how might we put these words into action?  
First, we should read over those baptismal promises.

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Consider how we're fulfilling each one --  
and really, they're all about loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves.  
This includes those folks who, like the tax collectors and sinners in the Gospel,  
are marginalized in our society.  
Let's look carefully how we as individuals care for them,  
and how we do it as a congregation.  
In other ways, too, Jesus in our baptism challenges us  
to look at every aspect of our lives.  
For instance, how do we use -- or abuse -- the gifts of life and creation?  
Something as secular-sounding as how and where we shop  
has a place in our spiritual lives.  
The lives of people we'll never see are touched every time we go to the store.  
We need to think carefully about that, and many other things.

I'm sure that there are hundreds of other examples that each of us can think of.  
The important thing is to remember that this Gospel should make us  
take a good look at our priorities -- take a good look at the place God has in our lives.  
If this passage really makes us squirm  
and think to ourselves that Jesus really has gone from preachin' to meddlin',  
we need to see why.  
I don't think that Jesus ever had squirming alone as his goal.  
Instead, Jesus sought—and the point of this Gospel still is--  
to energize us to get on about the business of being real disciples.  
And the question remains the same:  
Will we accept that call?

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