



“Priorities”

Scripture – Luke 14:25-34

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, September 4, 2016

The recent Olympics in Rio were inspiring, weren't they? It was incredible to watch Michael Phelps collect his 23rd gold medal and to see Katie Ledecky dominate her races by such staggering margins. Those swimming against Ledecky must have told themselves that if they had the best swim of their lives, they had a shot at a silver medal. The gold was already assured before Ledecky dove into the pool.

It wasn't much different in gymnastics where Simone Biles dazzled the world with her amazing acrobatics. Didn't she appear to defy gravity when she leaped into the air?

And what about Usain Bolt, the fastest man on the planet for the past three Olympics? He raced for the gold nine times and never lost.

I cannot forget the athletes from the developing countries who without the benefit of the latest technology, highest paid coaches, and an adequate bank account, worked hard day after day despite their disadvantages and won the right to compete on the world's foremost sports stage.

The Olympics showcase many athletes whose stories are inspiring and one group of athletes that always garners my admiration are the decathletes. How anyone can be so outstanding in the 100 meters, the 400 meters, the 1500 meters and the hurdles; plus the pole vault, long jump, high jump, shot put, javelin, and discus is unbelievable.

As I watched the Olympics with my grandson, I reminded him that these athletes were not simply born with extraordinary ability. They were not super human at birth. To reach the Olympics, they had to make hundreds of sacrifices along the way. To truly excel, you must show up at the pool at 6:00 a.m. and jump into the water even when it's freezing. You must lace up your shoes and go for a long run when the temperature is in the 90s. You must go to the gym and pump weights when your friends are going to the movies.

Olympians talked about missing weddings, birthdays, vacations, and spending countless hours away from the people they love. They made numerous personal sacrifices in order to excel. They had to be resolute in their determination to stay on task not only when they were on the top of their game but also, when the wheels fell off.

Many begin with high aspirations, but fail to persevere when obstacles appear. They simply do not have the resolve to keep forging ahead.

In today's passage, Jesus speaks of an unyielding resolve worthy of Olympians. He is still miles away from Jerusalem and a large entourage is walking along with him. He believes that many of those who have thrown in their lot with him do not comprehend the commitment that is required. So to clarify what is demanded, Jesus jars them with abrasive language. His business in Jerusalem is dangerous. It calls for devoted recruits, not ardent admirers. He needs followers who are fiercely determined to give him their undivided loyalty.¹

Today's text immediately grabs our attention because of its biting language. According to the author of Luke, Jesus describes the ferocity of commitment he expects by using the word "hate" – a severe word that sparks an intense response.

If a child boils with anger toward his older sister and screams, "I hate you!" His mother jumps in quickly and says, "We don't use that word. I understand that you are mad at your sister, but you do not *hate* her. We do not *hate* anyone."

We try not to attach the word "hate" to people. We hate terrorism. We hate heroin. We hate racism. We hate those things that destroy. Unless a parent has abused you, we veer away from using the word "hate" in connection with our parents. And almost no parent would say that he hates his son or daughter. Disappointed maybe, but extremely unlikely that we would say we hate our own child. Yet according to the author of Luke, Jesus said, "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."

Jesus did not really grasp the concept of marketing, did he? He could have expanded his entourage if he had made his appeal with a cute little green gecko like Geico Insurance uses. Or paint a vision of everyone grabbing the hand of the person next to them until they form a human chain that wraps around the world? Why didn't he go for heartwarming rather than offensive? Why not some uplifting music and catchy jingle? It is amazing that he did not run off every single person and bring his movement to an immediate halt.

Of course, Jesus is not demanding that we literally hate the members of our family. He was employing one of his favorite figures of speech – hyperbole – to drive home his point that our ultimate loyalty should be to God. We can witness what happens when families routinely rank family outings and children's sports above church. Priorities get out of line. Children can grow up with the notion that sports are the most important thing in life.

Church is where we talk about the things that matter most. This is where we put our lives in perspective, where we are reminded of the things that tear us apart, where we gain our greatest strength when storms blow in, where we learn the necessity of patience and forgiveness, where we discover guidance for difficult decisions, where we catch a vision of the kind of world God wants us to create, and where we find the foundation of true and lasting hope.

If Christ is first, all other relationships are strengthened and nourished. If family activities are first and church is pushed aside, then the ties are not as vibrant and robust as when Christ is in our homes.

In today's passage, Jesus not only uses shocking language to declare how our priorities ought to line up, he also counsels to us to carefully consider the commitment he wants us to make. Jesus says, "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build but was not able to finish.'"

Again, Jesus seems determined to thin his crowd of followers. "Before you jump on board with me, sit down and assess the cost. If you fail to calculate your commitment, you might not be able to see it through."

When people decide to get married, they know that it requires a life-long commitment. They make their vows in a special public ceremony, but before arriving at the altar, both ponder whether they can make such a commitment.

Shortly before the episode in today's passage, Jesus decided to head to Jerusalem. He had been in the Galilean countryside where his teaching and healing had been like dual magnets attracting so many people that the gospels say there were great multitudes traveling with him. But, when Jesus felt that God was compelling him to go to Jerusalem, his demeanor flipped. Jerusalem was the seat of his adversaries, the leaders aligned with Rome in oppressing the people. Jerusalem would be dangerous. He, and anyone connected to him, would be heading into a firestorm.

Living in the United States in the 21st century is a very different context from those first followers, yet the cost of discipleship still runs high. God expects us to commit our time, our attention, our minds, our skills and our money to following Jesus.

American, Dan Clendenin, taught in Moscow for four years. One day a young woman in one of his classes said that she had met a missionary from the U.S. while she was riding the subway. This fundamentalist told her that she could become a Christian. All she had to do was affirm four simple propositions in a little booklet and then say a short prayer. It was so simple. He asked, "Would you like to pray and become a Christian right now?" She declined. Telling her professor about it later that day, she said, "You Americans make being a Christian sound so simple and easy; for us Russians in the Orthodox tradition, it is much more difficult."²

You bet it's more difficult than simply believing certain theological statements. Jesus was constantly calling people to action. Rather than believing certain propositions, his emphasis was on how we live our faith.

Today's text reminds us that even though committing our lives to Christ brings meaning and purpose, joy and hope, it also requires sacrifice and commitment. How could it be any other way?

To overcome personal cravings – such as greed and lust – and to overcome personal shortcomings – such as anger and arrogance – you must give yourself to something beyond yourself. You must give yourself to something that is noble and true. You relinquish the constant focus on your small self and grow into your greater self when you commit to following the way of Jesus.

God knows that following the way of Jesus is not easy. It requires courage and commitment, stamina and spunk. But since these are the very things that bring zest to life, why would we ever opt for anything else?

NOTES

1. George B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, (London: Penguin Books, 1963), p.178.
2. Dan Clendenin, "Pay Up," *journeywithjesus.net*, August 28, 2016.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God – Weaver of life, framer of the ages, we marvel at your artistry and the trust you place in us. From our first cries to our final breaths, we are your own. We give thanks for your boundless love and abundant grace – love that compelled you to speak into a formless void, and call forth light and life; grace that dripped from your fingertips as you molded humankind from Eden’s dust.

You formed us, wonder-working God, with the care and imagination of a potter. But we have lived as imperfect creations. Time and again, we have wandered from your way – failing to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Yet, even in our brokenness, you have never abandoned us. We give thanks for your steadfast love and abiding grace –

love that chased after us through the calls of messengers and prophets;
grace that surprised us as manna in the wilderness and rainbow after the flood.

God of all creation, your claim on us is total; your desire for us, complete. Nowhere is this good news clearer than in the life, death, and resurrection of your Son ... Jesus came to show us the fullness of your love, and to teach us how to love you more fully. We know we cannot follow Christ from a comfortable distance. Send your Spirit into our hearts, we pray, until we yield all that we love and all that we fear to your holy purpose. For we long to cede our lives to you; we long to know the fullness of your joy.

We come to this table, O God, seeking strength for the journey of faith, that we might carry the cross and follow you. Pour out your Spirit upon us, and upon these – your gifts – of bread and cup; bind us to you and to one another in ways that nourish our souls, just as this feast nourishes our bodies, so that your purpose might find fulfillment in our common life and service. As we gather around this table, fill us – we pray – with Christ-like love and grace –

love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things;
grace that overflows through acts of compassion, justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Send us out from this table – filled, renewed, and transformed – to labor with you in your vineyard, until the work of your new creation is finished, and we feast with you at your table in glory. We pray in the name of Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray: **Our Father ...**