

St. Giles' Episcopal Church
September 5, 2010
Luke 14:25-33 – Planning to Follow Jesus
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

At the center of this morning's passage from the gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about making plans for what we want to accomplish. He uses two examples: first, planning a building project so that there are sufficient funds to complete it once it is begun; and second, planning a strategy of war so that one either goes into battle with a good chance of victory or, if not, one makes peace with the enemy before the fighting begins. Good, solid human advice that many of us can relate to: if you intend to accomplish something, be well prepared.

Now Jesus was talking to crowds of people who were following him, and the rest of his message is an explanation of what good preparation for being a disciple of Jesus might entail. The cross is central here. Luke reminds us where Jesus is going – to Jerusalem and the crucifixion. If we want to follow Jesus, we must be prepared to carry the cross and go to the same place. Jesus must be our priority above anyone else and above anything, even above life itself. Jesus is warning us of the cost of discipleship – it may mean giving up our closest human relationships, all our possessions, and even our lives. Commitment to Jesus Christ is serious and life-changing.

To put today's passage in a wider context, I'd like to read you the passage that appears just before this one, Luke 14:16-24 (Common English Bible translation):

Jesus said, "A certain man hosted a large dinner and invited many people. When it was time for the dinner to begin, he sent his servant to tell the invited guests, 'Come! The dinner is now ready.' One by one, they all began to make excuses. The first one told him, 'I bought a farm and must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I bought

five teams of oxen, and I'm going to check on them. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' When he returned, the servant reported these excuses to his master. The master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go quickly to the city's streets, the busy ones and the side streets, and bring the poor, crippled, blind, and lame.' The servant said, "Master, your instructions have been followed and there is still room.' The master said to the servant, 'Go to the highways and back alleys and urge people to come in so that my house will be filled. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will taste my dinner.'"

This story is about God's invitation to us to come into God's kingdom. Jesus told this story to teach those who would follow him something important about responding to God's invitation. It is simple really – saying "yes" to this invitation is far more important than any worldly concerns or interests. There is nothing wrong with a farm or farm animals or being married, but if we pay more attention to such things than God's invitation to God's kingdom, we may miss our opportunity to sit at the dinner.

It is interesting that the master of the house has his servant invite the poor, crippled, blind, and lame, and the people on the streets. They say "yes" to the invitation and enjoy the dinner. They offer no excuses, for these people aren't likely to own land or cattle or enjoy the pleasures of being newly wed. These are people who are poor in the judgment of the world, but free to say "yes" to God's invitation and so blessed in the sight of God.

All of us are here because we have heard God's invitation to follow Jesus and because we want to be Jesus' disciples. But we are busy people – busy with property and

possessions, with our jobs and occupations and hobbies, and with friends, family, and acquaintances. Our busyness may get in the way of our following Jesus.

Many years ago I took a course in Social Psychology that I enjoyed very much. Social psychologists use experimentation to study how human beings behave toward one another and what variables impact our behavior. Some of the experiments I studied were very clever. Here's one that is quite relevant to our gospel message.

The experiment took place on the campus of the Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey. The participants in the experiment, who did not know what the experiment was about, were students at the seminary. The students were instructed to arrive at a certain time at a certain building on campus for a lecture by a famous scholar. The subject of the lecture was Jesus' Parable of the Good Samaritan. Of course, the students knew the parable, as we do.

There was a man robbed and beaten, left on the side of the road. Religious and lay leaders passed by on the other side of the road, doing nothing to help him. However, a Samaritan – someone considered inferior by the people hearing this parable – had mercy on the man and helped him generously. Jesus asked his hearers which of these men had acted as a neighbor, and the answer was, of course, the Samaritan.

The students in the experiment arrived at the place where the lecture was to be held, at the time they were told it was to begin. The building was locked and there was a notice posted on the door informing them that the lecture had been moved to another building all the way across campus, but would begin at the time originally scheduled. Everyone was thus manipulated into being in a hurry and focused on getting quickly from Point A to Point B.

A woman actor who was “in” on the experiment was lying on the path between Point A and Point B, apparently having fallen and painfully injured her ankle. What the experimenters measured was how many seminary students on the way to a lecture about the Parable of the Good Samaritan would act like the Good Samaritan and stop and help the woman rather than arrive on time for the lecture. The answer was: very few!

Hearing about this experiment, we may find it very hard to believe that the students didn’t “get it,” that they didn’t comprehend that it was more important to behave like the Good Samaritan than listen to a lecture about the Good Samaritan. The social psychologists concluded that being in a hurry and being focused on an agenda like arriving on time was such a powerful factor that it obscured the bigger picture for these students, even in this rather obvious set-up.

What can we learn from all this? First of all, in our busy and noisy worlds, we may find it very hard to hear God, to be aware of God’s invitation to enter more fully into God’s kingdom. And even if we do hear God’s invitation, we may be tempted to offer excuses, to “send our regrets” rather than R.S.V.P. with a hearty, thankful “yes please.” We need to take action so that we will be “on call” and ready to respond to God and give up what keeps us from following Jesus.

Recently I read a health and fitness program which proposed the following rule: each day spend no more time watching television than you spend exercising. I began to wonder how we might apply similar rules to our lives as Christians? What would happen if we spent no more time on the telephone or on the internet or in front of the television than we did in prayer? What if we spent no more time reading murder mysteries and “beach books” than we did reading the Bible, the Prayer Book, or other spiritual reading?

What if we spent no more time listening to the bad news in the world than we did writing to our politicians to urge them to support improvements in the world? What if we spent no more money on junk food for ourselves and our families than we spend on donations of food for our local food pantries? What if we spent no more time worrying about our own needs than we spend lifting up to God the needs of others and doing something to help them?

You and I are followers of Jesus. Christian discipleship is our “project.” Like the person who wanted to build a tower or the king who prepared to wage war on another king, we must take time to sit down and consider what we are doing. We believe that nothing is more important than this project of listening to God and responding to the invitation to enter God’s kingdom. I pray that each of us will slow down and look and listen, so that we might receive God’s help to lead the lives God calls us to lead. In the name of Jesus, amen.