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Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 8, 2013

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## **“Count the Costs”**

*(Luke 14:25)*

Rev. David K. Groth

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*“Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple’ (Lk 14:25)*

### **Collect of the Day**

O merciful Lord, You did not spare Your only Son but delivered Him up for us all. Grant us courage and strength to take up the cross and follow Him, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Turn just a few pages in Luke and we're already into that first Holy Week. So that's what he's walking towards, and he knows it. He knows there's a cross awaiting him in the city. It had to have been difficult.

The crowd following him, on the other hand, is having a grand old time. They're on a joyful pilgrimage with family and friends, coming in from the Galilean countryside . . . looking forward to the sights and sounds of the capital city as it celebrates the Passover. It was a joyous, patriotic event. For the crowd, this isn't a death march; it's a parade, and everyone loves a parade!

They've made Jesus a sort of honorary chairman of their parade. They've been watching him preach and teach and heal in Galilee. They saw how he frustrated the Pharisees who were trying to entrap him and how he exposed their hypocrisy. They can hardly wait to see him do more of the same on the big stage of Jerusalem. It should be quite a show: their man from Galilee, the son of a carpenter, locking horns with the religious authorities in Jerusalem, maybe even the Roman authorities.

Earlier, admittedly, they were a little reticent to embrace Jesus. But that was a long time ago. Since then they've seen what he can do. No longer reluctant, now they are enthusiastic. Now they're coming to him. The crowd is swelling.

So what does Jesus have to say to this large crowd of would be disciples? They are some of the most surprising words to come out of his mouth: "If

anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” If these words don’t startle or offend you, you haven’t yet heard them. To follow him you have to hate those you love? Who then could ever be a disciple of Jesus?

Ordinarily, Jesus strikes us as being welcoming and winsome, the man with the shepherd’s voice calling out for the lost, the man who is never too tired to help people out of their misery, the one who holds children on his lap and blesses them. Ordinarily, he says, “Come, follow me!” But here he seems to be repelling those who would follow. Ordinarily he would say “the yoke I give you is easy and the burden light.” But now he’s saying if you can’t bear a cross you need not bother trying to follow. What a jolt that would have been on their ears. They knew what crosses were used for. So Jesus is throwing cold water on them, and saying, in effect, “Don’t be too hasty to sign on the dotted line. First count the costs of discipleship. You see, Jesus isn’t interested in having disciples whose hearts are divided between many loyalties. He’s looking for those who will follow him with a whole heart. He wants you either all in . . . or all out. Hot or cold, he says in Revelation 3, just not lukewarm.

I think he has in mind those today who want to keep some kind of connection with the holy, even if it’s by a very thin thread. They may come to church to enjoy a bit of music and to see a few friends, and feel spiritual for a time. They want to know God is out there somewhere should they ever need him, but for now they are happy to keep him at arm’s length. They’re not yet willing to be totally submerged in a godless world, nor are they willing to be totally submerged in the Kingdom of God.

Who knows, maybe at times they’re even momentarily stirred by a sermon or a hymn. But as soon as they’re back in the office, or in front of the T.V., it’s as if a switch was turned off. They’ve put God back

in his box until the next time they're in worship. They strive for success in the workplace, but they don't think of it in terms of vocation, serving others to the glory of God. They look at others around them, but not as those dearly loved by God, whom he wants us to love and serve. Remember, they want just a little bit of God, not all of him; a little bit of the sacred, but not so much that it seriously disrupts their secular lives. For some, a little bit of religion goes a long ways, and so a little bit of worship, a little bit of offering, a little bit of service . . . that'll do. Not too much; just a little bit.

Here's the problem. First, as I said earlier, Jesus doesn't want that. He says he can handle hot or cold, but he can't stomach lukewarm. That he spews out. Second, just a little bit of God in your life causes more trouble than you know. Anyone who wants to be part Christian and part worldling, is sure to be unhappy. On the one hand, he cannot give himself completely over to the pleasures of the world; he can no longer hate, or cheat or love or enjoy himself with a whole heart, because he's haunted by the question: Where do I stand with God? For example, how does being buzzed and flirtatious look in God's eyes? But on the other hand, he also cannot pray with a whole heart. He cannot really embrace the peace of God, nor the joy of communion with God because his conscience is so riddled with guilt. Allowing a little bit of God inside may make you less happy than forbidding God altogether.

I had an old Hebrew professor at the seminary who, during the summers, went on archaeological digs in remote parts of the Middle East. That background added an air of authenticity to one of his expressions: "Let the camel's nose in the tent, and pretty soon the whole beast will be inside." If you think you can let just a little bit of God in, and live happily ever after, think again. First, God isn't content with just his nose inside the tent. Secondly, you won't be either.

When we are only half-Christians we often feel a kind of envy of the thoroughgoing worldlings. They don't

seem to be bothered by many inhibitions. They don't trouble themselves about the plight refugees fleeing Syria or the famished in Ethiopia or even the hungry and homeless in Watertown. They don't have to give away their time and money. They get over a bit of tax fraud or a bit of adultery mostly unscathed, their consciences mostly unbruised. But we – that is, we half-Christians – have our inhibitions, don't we? We have our scruples, and our conscience is troubled by many things. We can no longer be thorough going, guilt-free, happy sinners, nor are we the joyous saints of the land. We have neither the pleasure of enjoying sin to its fullest, nor the higher joy of peace with God. We have neither; that's our trouble.

The great theological thinkers of the Middle Ages said that half-Christianity always leads to sadness. They even thought depression had its roots in such a divided heart. They said only the simple and single hearted are happy. I think there may be something to that.

It reminds me of that rich, young man who asked Jesus what he must do to be saved. Jesus, knowing the young man had made an idol of his wealth, told him to sell it all. Give the money to the poor. Then come, follow me with a simple and single heart. The man walked away from Jesus sad and dejected, because he couldn't let go of his other god. His heart was divided against itself.

The man who only wants a bit of God always finds God to be an impediment, a pain rather than a joy. If a man is struggling with the shadows of sadness and depression, he must at least ask himself, whether his heart is at odds with itself.

Think of it this way: There's a big difference between attending a professor's lectures and really being a student of that professor. This is why Jesus is so severe in this text. It is possible to follow him without really being a disciple.

“Whoever does not *hate* his own father and

mother and wife and children and even his own life cannot be my disciple.” By startling us with such harsh words, Jesus is trying to free us from this confounded dividedness. I don’t think he literally wants us to hate our family members. That would be in conflict with all the calls to love and care for and nourish especially one’s own family. What he is demanding, however, is that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ takes precedence over all the other claims on us. In fact, it redefines the other claims on us, and that will necessarily involve some detaching, some turning away.

At the start of every wedding ceremony, there are a few words about God’s intent for marriage. And then the liturgy continues, “Therefore marriage is not to be entered into inadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately.” So also following Jesus is not to be entered into inadvisedly or lightly or flippantly or frivolously or indifferently or casually. There are crosses involved: the one he died on for you, the ones your brothers and sisters in Christ are bearing right now, right now in places like Syria, Egypt, , even on American soil, at universities that gloat about how tolerant and diverse they are, while being cold and hostile to the Christian faith. Then there’s that cross he is asking you to bear. Verse 27, “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” You don’t have to go looking for a cross. Just take Jesus seriously in the workplace, at home, in the community, and those crosses will come looking for you, in the form of rejection, anger, disappointment, soft persecution, and the like.

So which will it be? All in or all out? Count the costs. It’s like building a tower, Jesus said, (not a chicken coup or a shed: “tower”) which implies a lot of effort, time, resources. A tower will never be built on the fuel of indifference.

It’s like a king going to war, Jesus says. Will he not first sit down and deliberate whether he is able with

ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Taking on an army twice the size of yours is generally not wise, especially if your heart really isn't in it.

You see what Jesus is doing here? He's driving us to despair of our own resolve to follow him, our own determination, and to trust in him for everything, for forgiveness, salvation, and for the courage to follow him. We cannot choose to be a disciple. If we are saved, we are saved only by his grace, not by our choices, our works. No one can make himself worthy of being his disciple. He makes us worthy by forgiving us our shortcomings. No one can come before him with an undivided heart. And yet in Holy Baptism, he claims all of us as his own, the good the bad and the ugly. In baptism he has also made his home with us. Not just the camel's nose and the rest of him too has entered into your tent and he's not intending to leave.

The Lord alone can build the tower. He alone can conquer the Old Evil Foe. He alone was obedient to the Father with undivided heart.

Journeying toward Jerusalem, he knew what was waiting for him. He knew the costs, the sum total, and he paid them all. Every last bit. No balance remains for you to pay. He was all in. He is all in for you. That's what saves you and me, not our singleness of heart, but his. Not our sacrifices, but his. Not our determination to follow, but his to save. Thanks be to God. Amen.

BUSINESS NAME  
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