

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 18
Year C

Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 1
Philemon 1-21
Luke 14:25-33

Have you ever joined a “book-of-the-month club” or something similar? When I was younger, I joined the Musical Heritage Society. Every month they would send out a notice of the recording they were featuring that month. If you didn’t decline it quickly, it came in the mail, along with the accompanying invoice. I received a lot of wonderful music through this program, but I also got stuck with some recordings that I ended up giving away. I didn’t read the fine print when I joined.

In this passage from Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is giving us the fine print - what does it really entail to be one of His disciples. Jesus lays it out in stark language, perhaps stronger than we would like to hear it. However, if we look at the life of His first disciples, they gave up their families to follow Jesus. As they spent a couple of years wandering around listening to His teaching and experiencing the great miracles, these followers of Jesus had to leave their families behind, possibly for months at a time. Now, Jesus is speaking to a larger group, those who have been attracted by the miracles, telling them what lies ahead.

Jesus gives three requirements for those who desire to be His disciples. First, they must put the work of the Kingdom of God ahead of everything else. By using a little hyperbole, Jesus gets the attention of those listening. He is telling them that, when it comes to the work of the Kingdom or family, the Kingdom of God must come first.

Next, we must carry the cross. What does Jesus mean by this? Obviously, He has not carried His cross yet, but Jesus has been looking toward Jerusalem and all that awaits Him there for some time. He knows what will happen to Him there and is asking His followers if they are prepared for the same treatment. Three times already, Jesus has told the disciples that He faced torture and death in Jerusalem. Now, He is warning them that the future will not be easy for them either. That is why He tells these two parables about counting the cost.

Finally, Jesus tells us we must give up all our possessions. We see those who take vows in monastic orders taking this requirement seriously. They follow the example of the early church, giving up personal ownership of material goods and holding everything in common. But, again, like with our families, Jesus is asking us to examine our priorities. Must we give up everything and live in poverty? I don’t think that is what Jesus is asking, but we need to be willing to place the work of the Kingdom of God above our material belongings. Jesus told the disciples to carry nothing with them when He sent them out. Here, He is asking us to be willing to set aside all the stuff in our lives and be ready to travel as He needs us to.

In all of these requirements, we see Jesus asking His followers to examine their priorities. He is giving them the small print of what to expect if they really want to be His disciples and giving them the opportunity to walk away if this is something they cannot do.

At the same time, Jesus is asking each of us to examine our priorities. What are our expectations as followers of Jesus? He has told us what He expects and leaves it to us to decide. We can go the way of everyone else or we can face the reality that being His followers requires us to sacrifice family, comforts, and material possession. The choice is ours.