

Text: Luke 14: 25-33
Title: Allegiance
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Roger Allen Nelson

I taught at 2 Christian high schools for a total of 10 years. That's 20 semesters of trying to help students grapple with salvation by grace alone. That's 20 semesters of their relentless resistance:

*But, you have to do your part.
You have to believe and behave.
You have to be good, go to church, and pray and stuff...
Otherwise, why bother?
Otherwise, it's not fair....*

Every year, in every semester, in every class someone would voice the conviction that there must be a measure of human responsibility. It can't all be God's grace. We must have to do something.

I'd respond that anything taking salvation out of God's hands and putting it in our hands dilutes, diminishes, or denies the gospel. It's grace at the beginning, grace in the middle, and grace at the end. Grace straight up. No salt on the rim, no ice cubes, no splash of tonic....

We're made right with God through Christ. We can't add anything or take anything away from that. And therefore, let us not drape it with other requirements or additional acts of merit. Ours is only the response.

Luke seems to be in on this outlandish good news.

He records Jesus telling parables where the humble, the poor, and those unable to repay are welcomed to the banquet table. He tells of Jesus breaking sabbath rules and table requirements, dismantling any idea that our efforts ensure our standing with God. He proclaims a gospel of grace in Jesus Christ – good news to the poor, freedom to the prisoner, recovery of sight for the blind, and setting the oppressed free.

And then it's as if he hears the resistance. He feels the push back against grace. It's as if he can see the kid in the second row raising his hand, "But we have to do our part. There has to be some requirement, some law, something that we do...."

To which Jesus says:

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.

Yikes! Feels like grace just left the building.

Dear friends, take Jesus at his literal word and none of us would find our place as the followers of Jesus. Take Jesus at his literal word and we would be required, by way of response, to love our enemies and hate our parents. We would be required to love our neighbor but hate our children. Take Jesus at his literal word and we're stuck with ridiculous requirements and crazy contradictions.

Therefore, this must be an example of what Fred Craddock calls, "sacred excess.... the gospel as hyperbole." Maybe this is just Jesus at his hyperbolic best – overstating things to make a point. Maybe this is just rhetorical overreach.

Really? It's just hyperbole?

There has to be something more than that.

Biblical scholars note that in Semitic languages the word here for "hate" is more akin to "disregard" and that it's often used not as an affective quality but as a measure of contrast. It suggests something more like to "love less." It's similar to the language of "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated..." "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I loved less..."

If anyone comes to me and does not love less their father and mother... they cannot be my disciple...

But neutered hyperbole loses its bite (to mix metaphors) because the hyperbole is what cuts to the quick and wrenches the heart. And just because it is hyperbole doesn't mean that it's not true....

So, if our standing with God is a matter of grace in Jesus Christ –what's our response? Are those saved by grace to love family less and love Jesus more? How do we count the cost before we go into battle?

The answer, in part, might be in the first few words of our text.

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them he said...

Luke is tracing the path of Jesus towards the cross. Therefore, one way to read this text is as an attempt by Jesus to thin out the crowd by saying:

Look, if you are just here for the grace and glory, if you're just here for the blessing and the banquet, if you're just here for the healing and the hoopla, then you need to hear the rest of the story. You need to count the cost. You need to weigh the demands. You need to carefully consider the repercussions. You need to take into account whether you can afford to follow or whether you can afford not to follow.

Jesus is thinning out the crowd by defining discipleship.

To follow Jesus your identity will not be constructed along family lines or social status; as a disciple of Jesus your defining allegiance will not be your possessions, your paternity, or your position; as a disciple of Jesus, you may even run the risk of being alienated from kith and kin.

For, there will be no casual devotion, no part time follower, no minimal fidelity or splintered heart. This will demand your all because the journey is toward the cross.

In the words of Scott Hoezee,

...live in such a way as to make clear that you have put to death the things of this world — its addiction to power, its adoration of only the beautiful and successful, its cut-throat ways of climbing to the top of any and every heap, its love of violence and intimidation and war. To live under a cross-bar was to engage in a form of living death, of sacrificial living for the sake of others and of the kingdom of God.

The essential question, underneath all the hyperbole, is a question of allegiance. Who will you follow in this world? As those made right with God through Christ will you embody his way of being? Will you respond in obedience?

There's a great deal of hand wringing in religious circles about the decline of the church in the Western world. I don't think my neighbors who only go to church for weddings or funerals are concerned, but I can assure you that the church world is worried. As a friend said to me recently, "When news media, social media, and consumer media get 18 hour a day, preaching for 20 minutes one day a week doesn't have a prayer."

In "The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened." Diana Butler Bass puts it this way,

...many people are just bored... Many of my friends, faithful churchgoers for decades, are dropping out because religion is dull, the purview of folks who never want to change or always want to fight about someone else's sex life.... On Sundays, other things are more interesting — the New York Times, sports, shopping, Facebook, family time, working in the garden, biking, hiking, sipping lattes at the local coffee shop, meeting up at the dog park, getting the kids to their soccer game.

And look, I'm not equating worship attendance with cross bearing, but discipleship is clearly swimming against the flood of contemporary culture. And, this world doesn't afford us the luxury of neutrality.

The allegiance of our hearts has consequences. The direction in which we set our hearts shapes how then we live. So, with the rhetorical tool of exaggeration, Jesus

is calling us to examine whom we serve: A gospel of grace or a gospel of self-interest? Christ or culture?

Now, with apologies to Jesus, I'm a failure at trying to love my family less than I love Jesus. I love my wife and kids with all the hope that this old world can hold. And, truth be told, I'm happy to let myself off the hyperbolic hook by claiming that the best way that I know to give my heart to God is to give my heart to my family, friends, neighbors, and enemies....

But, dear friends, it seems that our first response to God's grace in Christ is to offer our hearts – even knowing that there will be a substantial cost. I know that's uniquely religious language. I know that it's decidedly individualistic and sort of mushy, but in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ:

Can we align our hearts with Jesus?
Can we follow him against the grain?
Can we be disciples who serve a master?
What's the cost?

This isn't about salvation; God has already taken care of that. This is about the caliber and character of our response. This isn't about earning anything, or securing anything, but it is about a life of discipleship, a life of following the way of Jesus. Loving our enemies, forgiving as we've been forgiven, turning the other cheek, etc, etc, all of that is only plausible and possible if our heart's allegiance is pledged first to Jesus.

May God give us the Spirit, the courage, and the unbending will to reconnoiter our hearts toward Jesus – and in doing so change our way of being.

Amen.