

Luke 14:25-33

Sept. 4, 2022

Grace and peace be with you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

What's the biggest concert you've been to?

Anyone been to a concert at Mile High?

I think the biggest I've been to has been the Ball Arena size venue, which I think is about twice the size as Red Rocks – about 20,000 people.

I've never actually been to a stadium tour. Seems like a waste of money if you have to watch things on the jumbo-tron, but obviously people enjoy it, right?

So, imagine you are at Mile High. Can you see the stage and all the people?

Now, imagine, standing in the middle of the stage, you see Jesus standing there. The crowd goes wild. There is Cheering and screaming everywhere you turn. The long awaited Messiah has arrived and you are there soaking it all in with 76,000 of your closest friends.

A chant starts to go up in the crowd from over there – Messiah! Messiah! A wave starts as the crowd goes wild! And then, Jesus puts up his hands for the crowds to quiet so that he can speak. Once it goes quiet he says – take a look to your left and your right – if you want to follow me you have to hate those people.

And the crowd goes silent and starts murmuring. Looking quizzically at each other they ask, “What in the world is he talking about?” And some of the people decide this whole thing isn't for them. They love these people, that's why they are here together. They are their security, and so they leave.

And then Jesus goes on to say – if you want to follow me, you will have to pick up the empire's means of killing insurrectionists and follow me. To the death!

And while some cheer, still more exit the stadium questioning each other about what they heard – I thought he was going to kill the Romans. I didn't think we'd have to die. He can't be the Messiah, right? And so they go on their way.

And then the coup d'e-tat. Jesus says, “If you are going to follow me, you'll have to give up everything – all of it!” And then there is a rumble in the crowd. “We have so little and you want us to give it up? That can't be right. You are supposed to give us stuff. We're not supposed to give stuff up.” And they leave as they grumble and hiss with their hopes dashed to the ground.

And then Jesus finds himself with a small band of followers who trust him and believe that he knows what he is doing.

These are the ones who have listened, and watched, and believed that there is another way to live in the world, different from the ways of Rome or Jerusalem – a way of mutual love and respect – a way of caring for others as much as you care for yourself – a relationship of equality instead of a hierarchy – a community instead of isolation – sharing instead of hoarding – a life filled with hope instead of fear.

In the Gospel today, Jesus asks those who would follow him – where will your true allegiance lie? Will it be with your own family or with God? Who will you choose? You see hate here has more to do with who you will you put first – God or yourself and your blood relatives?

You see, family, your blood relatives, were super important. You disagree with your family, you don't follow what the patriarch says, and you can be out on your can, begging on the street. Going against your family, should they be against following Jesus, would have been a life or death question under normal circumstances. But as God is the true Patriarch, sticking with God is always the better choice, right?

And then he invites those who would follow him to pick up THE cross and follow in the way. You'll notice here in Luke, unlike Mark, that it is not YOUR cross, but THE cross. Jesus invites us to come along on the way with a new family who shares the same ideals and convictions, who believe that there is another way to live in the world – a Godly way.

Those who follow Jesus are faithful people who just can't stand the status quo of the world. These people lament oppression, and simultaneously live in hope and praise God. In the midst of occupation, they can still see God among them, especially when they are with Jesus. And so, although they really don't know what's going on, they go along with Jesus, trusting him, willing to help carry the cross in whatever way they can.

When Jesus asks us to pick up the cross and follow him and be his disciples, he is asking us to live differently in our world. To put God's will ahead of our own. To care for others and their needs. To not be okay with oppression in any of its forms. To seek justice for all people, so that all people can live. To give up a little for the wellbeing of all. To share in God's generosity by being generous.

That's the cross and that is the foundation of Christianity.

Yes – Jesus died on the cross so that we wouldn't have to, but Jesus was risen from the dead as a testimony to who God is so that we can go live for the wellbeing of others with nothing to fear. Death is not the end of the story.

Too often people think the cross was a transaction and that our sin bill is paid and we can just go do whatever we want, but that's not the meaning of the cross.

The meaning of the cross is that when we give up our will for God's will, God's will for the wellbeing of others, that's when we are truly alive, because that is when we are one with God the source of all life, and we are invited into that eternal life every day.

And it's not a solo act. Yes – Jesus went to the cross by himself, but he invites his followers to pick it up with him and take it out into the world as a community so that all people will know God's love through our words and actions with one another.

True discipleship is sharing God's example of self-giving love out in the world as a testimony to who God is.

Disciples follow Jesus and then in his absence live as he did, and the Holy Spirit helps us to live that life today. We need only listen for the Spirit's direction. The Spirit will show us the way. Just as Paul was led to write Philemon, to tell him to let his slave Onesimus go free and to set a good Christ-like example for all the followers that met in his house, so the Spirit also leads us.

The Spirit asked Philemon – how can you be a true leader in the Church while you hold someone captive? In Christ, we are family, and so Paul calls both Philemon and Onesimus his brothers, and encourages Philemon to make the next faithful step in the Gospel – to set Onesimus free. And according to Church history, that is exactly what he did. Philemon picked up the cross and made the wellbeing of Onesimus his priority.

He lost a slave, but he gained a brother, and the whole church gained a new evangelist- two new evangelists actually – two good news bearers in both Onesimus and Philemon.

If Christ has set you free, you are free indeed, and if you are free, how can you hold another captive? It makes no sense.

So just imagine the scene. Onesimus is set free in the midst of a community. He is embraced as a brother and everyone rejoices, everyone cheers! This is the celebration that God places in the world. This is the party that the crowd who didn't follow Jesus might have missed out on, because they were only thinking about themselves.

You can't be part of the Kingdom if you are only worried about yourself. The mystics actually say that hell is everyone being self-centered. When anyone realizes that they are being self-centered and care about someone else, they immediately leave hell and are part of heaven, because that is God's way of beginning and we get to participate in it here and now.

Jesus didn't come for himself. He came for us. That's the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. The cross is not a selfish act. It is a life giving act for the sake of others. It is total selflessness.

So, what might be the next faithful step for you to take on the way? Is there someone you need to set free? Is there something you need to do for the good of community? Something for the wellbeing of others?

I know that might be a deep question for Labor Day Weekend, but it is Labor Day Weekend and on Monday we rest from our Labors. So, is there someone else that needs rest, who we need to set free so that they can rest?

As a slave, Onesimus wasn't living his full call, his full vocation. It is only in total freedom from being held captive by a man that he was able to go serve God, and fully be who God created him to be.

You'll notice that Paul is a slave of no man. Paul is a slave of God. That means he puts God's will ahead of his own, and that is what disciples do. And just to be clear, it's not a threat. "You better do this or else!"

I don't like that the lectionary people put the Deuteronomy text with the others we have for today, because I don't want you to be confused brothers and sisters. Deuteronomy takes place as the Israelites enter the Promised Land, and they were told to stick with God or they would get kicked out. They didn't stick with God and they were kicked out, but that wasn't the end of their story. They returned to the Promised Land, but under occupation by the Persians, Greeks and then the Romans.

And so Jesus points to the only way we can truly live God's Kingdom. It's not as an earthly government, but as a loving community where interpersonal relationships are what matter. It doesn't matter the government we have, we can always live God's Kingdom. In good times, wars, pandemics, disasters, or whatever may come our way, we are always citizens with the saints, able to live in God's Kingdom now.

The question is just – what is the next faithful step in our journey? We are constantly growing in love. In Philemon's growth, he was able to set Onesimus free. What might your next step in forming community be?

We are already God's beloved children, which means we have nothing to fear. We can take that next step knowing that we are never alone. We are walking with Jesus, guided by the Holy Spirit, carrying the cross of love, compassion, and mercy.

Thanks be to God! Amen.