

Luke 14:25-35

About the only way that a pastor would pick these words of Jesus to preach on is if he was in the habit of opening his Bible in the pulpit, and whichever text his finger happened to land on became his sermon text for that Sunday. Today, every pastor who uses the 3-year series, and I'm one of them, has this text in front of him...unless he chooses to preach on the Old Testament lesson or the Epistle. Jesus speaks here of hating our father and mother, our wife and children--not a good choice for a wedding text--our brother and sister, and even our own life. He talks about not being able to complete a tower, of a king who is outnumbered going into battle. He speaks of renouncing all that we have, and of salt that loses its saltiness. There is not much in here that would endear the hearer to these words of Jesus. I can't imagine any Christian having this as his Confirmation verse.

Jesus here is not calling for greater commitment from us. He is not seeking a decision from us. He is not telling us what we can, or should do. He is telling us what we cannot do. Three times in these verses Jesus uses the same four-word phrase. In verse 26, verse 27, and verse 33. That four-word phrase is this, "*Cannot be My disciple.*" "If you do not hate father and mother, wife and children...and even your own life, you *cannot be My disciple.*" "If you do not bear your own cross and come after Me, you *cannot be My disciple.*" "If you do not renounce all that you have, you *cannot be My disciple.*"

It seems like Jesus does not want all that many disciples. But that's not what He is saying. He wants every sinner to be His disciple. Yet He knows how difficult, how impossible this is. Following Jesus is not like following someone on Twitter. It's not like following your favorite sports team. We're outnumbered like a king going into battle. Satan, the sinful world, and our own flesh are against us following Jesus. We're like a man who is unable to finish a tower. Simply put, we cannot follow Jesus--we cannot finish the tower using our strength, our convictions, our resources. Anyone who thinks he has what it takes to follow Jesus is lying to himself, and he is also calling Jesus a liar.

Jesus, by these words in our text, is not calling for us to reach down within ourselves and follow Him with greater commitment. He is not telling us to do anything here--nothing that you and I are capable of doing, that is. He is, over and over, telling us that you and I cannot be His disciples. We don't have what it takes. We'll start, but we won't finish. In the end, we'll be defeated.

We, however, like to think that we're different. Others may not be able to, but I can follow Jesus. I do have what it takes. I have enough faith and commitment to follow through to the end with Jesus. To think this way is not renouncing myself and all that I have. To think this way is the mark of a fool; of salt that has already lost its saltiness.

Let me show you a man who did not think this way. The thief on the cross. This man did not look to himself, to anything that he had, to any good work he had done. He renounced himself. He renounced father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. They were not there to save him, and he could not save himself. All he had was Jesus. The only one he could turn to was Jesus. This thief turned away from himself in his dying hours. He repented of all that he was, and of all he had done. And he turned to Jesus. If Jesus would not save him, no one would. If Jesus could not deliver his soul from hell, no one could. But he knew Jesus could. And he knew He would. "*Jesus, remember me,*" he said. And Jesus replied, "*You will be with Me in Paradise.*"

Here we see a man who was a disciple of Jesus, not because he had what it takes, but because he had nothing...nothing except Jesus. He renounced his family, not by thinking evil of them, but by refusing

to turn to them for help. He hated his own life by refusing to see anything in himself that could save his soul from hell. He bore his own cross, not by being nailed to one--for this was justice for him. He was being punished for his crimes. He bore his cross by suffering persecution from the other thief who mocked him for following Jesus.

Unless you and I become like this thief, we cannot be disciples of Jesus. But we can't do it. Discipleship does not come from within us. It comes from Jesus. That thief had no intention of becoming a disciple of Jesus as he was being nailed to his cross. Yet Jesus, through the words He was speaking, called that man to discipleship. Jesus did for this poor, dying thief what he could not do for himself. He made him a follower, a disciple, one who would be with his Lord forever in Paradise.

People often have the wrong idea about why they come to church. It's not so that you can make sense of all that is being said and done here; so that you are prompted to make a decision and say, "Yes!" to God; so that you leave with a greater sense of commitment. You are here so that Jesus, through His words spoken, sung, confessed, and given here is the One who is at work within you and through you.

You are the "*salt of the earth*," says Jesus. How does salt become salt? It's a chemical bond that makes salt what it is. In Holy Baptism that bond happened to you. In your baptism you were bound to Jesus. This is where you became His follower, His disciple. You did not do it...He did. Jesus bound Himself to you so intimately as to make you a new creation, no longer children of wrath and people without hope. In Christ you became children of light, born again by God's Spirit, sins forgiven, people of faith with the hope of eternal life. Because you are bound to Christ, He is living His life through you.

You don't tell salt to be salty. It's salty because it's salt. It flavors food because that is what salt does. And so you come here to church where Jesus enters you through Word and Sacrament; where He works within you so that you repent of your sins and are raised up by His word of forgiveness, and then go out and live a sanctified life. You come here because that's what disciples do. You don't beg and plead with salt to be salty. It's salty because it's salt. And disciples of Jesus follow their Lord. It's what disciples do.

Salt that loses its saltiness is no longer salt. The only way for salt to lose its taste is for the chemical bond to break. But when that happens, it's not salt anymore. As long as you are bound to Christ, you are His disciple. But when that bond with Jesus is severed, disciples stop being disciples. They no longer follow their Lord. They stop hungering for the preaching of His Word, for His words of grace and forgiveness, for His body and blood.

And so God, in mercy, draws you here. In mercy God put that thief on a hard, wooden pew next to Jesus. And that's why you are here. Your sins have nailed you down, but God has placed you here next to Jesus. And His words are spoken here for you. Like that thief, God is showing you that you, too, have nothing, and are nothing before Him--nothing but a dying sinner. But Jesus is here for you. "I forgive you," are His words to each one of you. You have nothing, but He gives you everything. You have fallen often as His disciple during the week, but He lifts you up and He restores you to discipleship. He makes you light, and salt, and followers, and disciples. And He gives you a place in Paradise with Him forever.

It's what Jesus does because it's who He is---a God who dies for thieves and wretched sinners; a God who makes disciples of thieves and wretched sinners; a God who gives Paradise to thieves and

wretched sinners like us. Today you have heard the Word of God. Now God--this merciful and forgiving God--is the one who is at work in you who believe. Amen.