

Luke 14:25-33

Which is better: quantity or quality? Would you rather have three lawnmowers that don't work, or one good one that works well? Would an employer rather have four lazy employees, or one hard-working employee that he can trust? And here's one...would God rather have 100 million followers who were only somewhat committed to Him, or a much smaller group of dedicated disciples?

According to Jesus' own words, it seems that He is not very impressed by quantity; He looks for quality. Unlike many church leaders today who desire growth in numbers above everything else, Jesus turned to the large numbers following Him and essentially told them, "'Don't follow Me unless you are committed to Me.'"

But then, God has never been impressed with numbers. When Gideon was about to take a large army into battle, God whittled that number down to just 300 men. And when feeding the 5,000, after which Jesus said some things that turned most all of the people away from Him, He didn't try to stop them. He just watched them go. It seems as if God doesn't want "half-hearted" Christians. In fact, here's what He says in our text: "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...and gives up everything he has, he cannot be My disciple."

Now, of course, the word "hate" here cannot and does not mean "to loathe and despise." It simply means "to love less." It's a word of comparison. Compared to how we are to love God, we hate everyone else. We don't loathe and despise them. We are simply to love all others less than we love God.

I suppose I could start using this word in our wedding services. Instead of having the bride and groom promise to "forsake" all others as they love and honor each other, I could ask them to "hate" all others. "Compared to how you will now love and honor your spouse, you are to hate everyone else." Obviously we won't use that word at our weddings here, but Jesus does say this word to us: "Unless you hate your family and yourself, you cannot be My disciple."

Would a man marry his fiancée if he knew that she had no intention of being faithful to him? I wouldn't think so. And so, doesn't God have the right, as our Divine Husband, to insist that we are faithful to Him; that we forsake all others; that we love no one and nothing—not even ourselves—more than we love Him?

We don't think much of husbands and wives who cheat on their spouses, do we? We loathe and despise that kind of behavior. But that's exactly what we do to God! We cheat on Him. And not just once or twice, but on a daily basis. He made you His Bride in your baptism. He committed Himself to you. He promised to be faithful to you. And He has kept His word. But we turn right around and put family, friends, and ourselves ahead of Him. We don't forsake all others. Instead of loving others less than we love God, we love God less than we love others. This means that we "hate" God. Compared to how we love ourselves, our things, and our families, we hate God. I'm as guilty as you. Look at where we spend our time, our energy, and our money. God never gets the best of what we have. He gets the measly leftovers.

Will a marriage work if only one spouse is faithful? Not if that marriage is comprised of two sinners like us. But with God all things are possible. For with God there is forgiveness. The very thing God requires of us He demands of Himself. Jesus “hated” everyone and everything else, even Himself, in order to love you. He forsook the glory that was His in order to cleave to you His Bride. And because He did this for you, you are forgiven. Jesus doesn’t love you less because you and I so often put Him last in line. Rather, He loved you above all things, even His own life. He loved you by dying for you. He gave up His rightful place with the Father and exchanged it for a splintery cross. He hated His own life, meaning He loved Himself less than He loved you, and so He took your sins and He suffered hell in your place.

Jesus talks about a man, in our text, who is ridiculed because he cannot finish the tower he begins to build. That’s us every day! We have good intentions, but we don’t follow through too well. “Since God loves me, I’m going to read my Bible more, attend church more; I’m going to be a committed disciple of His.” But we are too weak and sinful to follow through. Our love for God never surpasses our love for ourselves and others. We don’t finish that tower we’re building.

Friend, Jesus finished your tower for you. You and I cannot build any tower up to Him, so He came down to hang on a cross for you. He doesn’t call you His disciple because of your love for Him and what you do to serve Him. He calls you His disciple because He died for you, and because He washed you in the waters of Baptism, and because He loved you above all things. Is He pleased that we love others more than we love Him? No, but He is pleased to forgive you for this. He doesn’t withhold His mercy from you because of our sinful ways. He is always pleased to give you grace upon grace, and mercy upon mercy.

God finished what He started. He didn’t quit half-way up the road to Calvary. He followed all the way through. He suffered every bit of punishment that you and I deserved. And that’s why we are His disciples—not because of what we do, but because of what He did and does for you. “If you don’t love Me above everyone and everything else,” He says, “you cannot be My disciple.” I don’t and you don’t. And here is the point of it—if being His disciple is up to what we do for Him, and how much we love Him, none of us would qualify. We don’t cut it. If God wants quality, we don’t have it.

And so we should stop looking at how much we give, and how often we attend, and how hard we serve, because you and I can never be Jesus’ disciples based upon what we do for Him. We simply don’t love and serve God above everyone and everything else. And yet you are Jesus’ disciples. You are His child. You are His follower, His saint. Why? Because of what Jesus did for you. We don’t choose Him; He chose you. He chose to love you precisely because we don’t love Him as we should. He chose to die for you so that our sins cannot ever separate us from Him.

Whether you come here to His House every week or just now and then, He loves you just the same. There is not one of you that your Lord loves less than another. There is not one of you that is less forgiven by Him than another. Does He desire for us to love and serve Him well? Of course. But your love and service to Him has nothing to do with who you are. You are His forgiven child, His beloved disciple for one reason—because of what He has done for you through His sufferings, death, and resurrection. He has chosen you. He has called you by His Gospel. He makes you who and what you are.

So maybe we are a group of half-way committed disciples here at Christ Lutheran Church in Augusta. Do not despair. As long as His Word of Grace is here; as long as He is here baptizing us, feeding us, and teaching us, and giving us His mercy through these holy things, you are and remain His beloved Bride, His forgiven Church. It's all because of Jesus and His love for you. Amen.