

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
September 4, 2022  
Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

## Give Up All Your Possessions

Give up all your possessions. That's the standard of discipleship in today's gospel.

It comes at the end of the passage as we've just heard, but it applies to all four hard sayings in today's gospel.

Four hard sayings: Hate your family. Count the cost. Carry the cross. Give up all your possessions.

How are these four injunctions related? What do they mean?

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“*Hate* my father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters—and even my own life?” This saying likely fell on the ears of many in the crowd that Jesus is addressing as bordering on blasphemy. The law of Moses says “honor your father and your mother.” It's the fifth of the ten commandments, and it's the first commandment with a promise: do right by your parents and your own life will be blessed.

For first-century Jews in Palestine, family was of an importance that we probably can't even imagine, not even those of us with tightly-knit extended families. In this kind of premodern and agriculturally-based society, one's family was both the primary social unit and the primary economic unit. Everything came from your family: your identity, your financial security, your reputation. It would be virtually impossible for them to imagine turning their backs on their family.

Yet, as we have seen these last several weeks, that's exactly what the Jewish followers of Jesus to whom Luke's gospel was originally addressed have done; in choosing to follow Jesus, they have lost their families. It was hard. Family was what saved you, what kept you alive. Family is what you had to depend on in order to survive.

Remember that Luke's gospel was originally addressed to these small communities

of Jewish Jesus followers around the Mediterranean region. They are no longer welcome in the synagogues. They have demonstrated their love for and dedication to Jesus the Christ. In doing this, their families do feel they are hated in comparison with how these folks love and follow Jesus. Their families have been split over Jesus.

What about us? What do we do with this call to hate our family? We live in a postmodern, non-agricultural society. We have mobility and autonomy inconceivable to our ancestors and unimaginable even now to most of the humans who share the planet with us at this moment. Our problem is not usually being unable to live without our family but being unable to live *with* them. We understand that there are lots of different kinds of families and that not all of them are particularly life-giving. We may be inwardly delighted to hear Jesus say, “Hate your family and follow me.”

But, as much as we might like to hear it as a free pass to get out of dealing with ornery parents, frustrating mates and children or grandchildren, or cantankerous siblings, as we receive this word of Jesus today, he’s probably not saying turn your back on your mama and daddy when they need you in their old age. He’s probably not saying get a divorce because you got religion. He’s probably not saying leave your sibling holding the bag of taking care of your parents because they’re just so impossible to work with.

What if for us today this word from Jesus means “Give up all *attachments* to your family”? Not all connections but all unhealthy and death-dealing attachments. Not give up legitimate responsibilities for and to them but give up all the ways they possess us that don’t give us life. And this one is probably harder and just possibly even more important: what if it’s a call for us to give up imposing our ideals and agendas on our family members; give up *possessing* them—give up treating our family members *as possessions*. They belong with us, not to us.

Is it really possible to regard another person as a possession? Centuries of chattel slavery in the ancient and modern world testify that human beings have often regarded other human beings as property and treated them as such, as objects rather than as subjects.

In the epistle reading Paul is addressing this very thing, appealing to Philemon to receive back into his household Onesimus, a runaway slave who has become a Christian, like Philemon himself. Take him back, Paul writes, not because I’m ordering you to but out of love: he had cause to run away, and you have cause to take him back: he’s now your brother, not your property. Give him up as your

possession.

We would be hard pressed to find very many advocates of chattel slavery in 2022. I dare say that none of us would ever condone the treatment of others as property. But the notions that legitimated holding other human beings in bondage persist. And they are insidious and difficult both to identify and to root out.

Our psalm today bears witness that every human being is “marvelously made.” Yet how many times have I sent the message that I value a material object more than a person? Worse yet, how many times have I treated other people as though they were things, as though they were possessions?

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And then, that next hard saying in today’s gospel: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

And then he mentions counting the cost before beginning the endeavor, like making sure you can afford the costs of the materials before starting a building project; like assessing accurately whether you can defeat an enemy with the troop strength at your command.

This counting the cost and assessing readiness is related to taking up one’s cross.

Well, we may say, the writer of Luke’s gospel wrote this after knowing the whole story. This is dramatic foreshadowing of what’s to come, of the means by which Jesus will die. This is a saying intended for the early church. Maybe Jesus didn’t even ever say anything close to this to the people on the road with him. Maybe he didn’t. But maybe he did.

We have used this saying for centuries to describe chores we’d rather not do, people we’d rather not deal with, work we don’t feel inspired to complete, saying: *It’s just the cross I have to bear.* But is that it, really?

What does it mean to carry the cross in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? What has it ever meant?

800 years before Jesus, the equidistant cross—one in which the vertical and horizontal axes are the same length—was a widespread and powerful symbol in many cultures. And it’s the only cross that appears in Christian art until the fourth century, never the elongated cross we’ve become more accustomed to, and never

with a corpus on the cross. Four hundred years of an empty, equidistant cross.

The equidistant cross visualizes balance. It is empty. It has nothing attached, and it has no attachments.

What if the call to carry the cross means we should give up the delusion that our life is our own possession?

What if carrying the cross means living in harmony with God and others and creation and self, in balance, unburdened by possessions and attachments—by anything that does not serve—and fortified by right relating and doing the work meant for us that suits us, restored and restoring in grace and nourished by the ongoing grace of the sacraments?

Give up all your possessions, all your attachments. Can we do it? Can we give up all our stuff, material, familial, relational, and delusional—all our possessions, all our attachments, all that does not serve? We can, with God's help.

If we give them all up today, will it last? If we lay it all on the altar, will it stay? Most likely, not for long.

But be of good cheer. God is the potter of Jeremiah: awake—not asleep—at the wheel and loving us, accepting us as we are and willing to work with us exactly as we are—if we are willing to be worked with, to help us conform more and more to God's best for us.

And at least once a week, we practice this together. At least once a week, at this table of thanksgiving, this altar of sacrifice, we get to lift up our hearts and raise our open hands to receive the sacrament. And when we do, we let go of all our attachments; we give up all our possessions.

### *Open Hands*

by Kendall Lockerman

St Bartholomew's Episcopal Church, Atlanta, GA

Kneeling at the altar rail with open hands  
waiting for the sacrament of the holy supper  
Praying for recognition of the moment  
when it happens, if it happens  
The bread of heaven, the cup of salvation  
the gifts of God for the people of God

The sweet purity of the language  
the ancient words of mystery  
The miracle does not happen at the table of the feast  
over the glittering silver  
Sitting pristine on the fair linen  
hallowed by the words of the mass  
The miracle is the open hands  
which have let go of all that they ever held  
that they be filled with all that there is

[Amen]