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~ *Luke 14:25-33* ~

Bishop Jason Zinko

Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod

Over the last little while I've been looking into improving my communication. It's a skill I need to improve in general, and it's something that the Synod Office needs to improve so that we can be better connected to our congregations.

Communication can be all kinds of things. It can mean how we get our ideas across to another person. It can mean how effectively we share information. It can also be how we try to attract people to something that we find meaningful – like advertising and social media.

And you know what I realized about communication after reading today's gospel? Jesus really needs to work on his communication too.

From this reading, it almost seems like Jesus never really wanted any followers. I mean really... if you and I wanted to get people to listen to us, to understand us, and to follow us, we would say something nice, wouldn't we? We would give people encouraging words. We would try to convince people that it would be fun and worth their while to be on our team.

But not Jesus. He sounds a bit like he's trying to scare people away. There are no nice, comforting words here. He's about as far away from that as you can get. I don't think he could have made being a disciple sound much harder.

Hate your father and mother? That sounds harsh to us. But I don't think we can even imagine how absurd, or even offensive, this would have been to the crowd following him.

In Jesus' day, family was *everything*. Families needed to band together so that they could survive. Inheritances of land and cattle were essential for people to have a good start. Extended families often lived together so that they could produce more than what a single

family could on their own. Sure, families had squabbles and disagreements, and some were dysfunctional, but *hate*? That seems to be going a bit far.

But Jesus wasn't done. Not only does it sound like he's trying to split up families, but he also hints that people would have to willingly march toward a torturous death. By that time, people would have known what carrying a cross meant. It meant that the Roman occupying army was making you carry your own instrument of death through the streets. It was a public reminder to everyone that the Romans were in control, so you better behave yourself. Who would still want to follow Jesus when he says to get ready to die?

I imagine that more than a few of the people in the crowd following Jesus had already decided to stop walking with this teacher and had begun walking away.

So, just in case there was anyone left following, Jesus adds in the part about giving up all your possessions. Great... in order to follow Jesus, we have to turn our backs on our families, prepare ourselves to die AND give up any sort of security that would ensure we had food, clothes, and a place to stay. No wonder there were only 12 disciples.

These are strong words from Jesus.

So before we start making our way to the door, it's important to know that Jesus often uses strong language to make a point. Like how we talk about driving "a million miles an hour" when we mean going fast, or when we say we're "starving to death" when we skipped a single meal.

Do I think Jesus actually meant for people to *hate* their relatives and literally get ready to walk in a procession to die? Do I think Jesus meant to give up absolutely everything and risk starving to death? No, I don't. Jesus wouldn't teach people to hate or ask everyone to be beggars on the street. In fact, throughout Luke's gospel he teaches the opposite. He says "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27). He tells people to love their enemies and pray for people who hate you (Luke 6:27). He constantly shows grace and heals those who are looked down on by society. He weeps over Jerusalem and the destruction he sees coming (Luke 19:41-44).

So, the language of hate, death, and complete poverty in this story is an exaggeration so people don't miss that he is saying something really, really important.

Jesus is talking about how important it is to keep our faith central in all that we do, in all areas of life. Following Jesus is an invitation to learn each day at Jesus' feet – to hear his teaching, to connect with God in prayer, to witness the work of the Holy Spirit in us and through others. Being a disciple means to be a student – a learner – for our whole lives, trusting that God can form us in our faith as we continue to see Jesus' action and hear Jesus' words each day.

This is the heart of being the church. The church is not programs or traditions or buildings or style of worship or anything else. The church is about inviting people to see and hear

the grace of God, and then inviting them to be disciples. While God does the heavy lifting, this is also our work to carry on. It is only as we grow in our own faith that we can believe and trust in God's promises and see the new life that Christ has already prepared for us.

I think that for too long, and in too many places, we have forgotten that being disciples is the central work of the church. Everything else we do flows from being disciples. All of our plans, ideas, dreams, and ministries will come to nothing if they are not built first on following Jesus.

If you have been following the news from the National Church, then you know that the convention approved a plan to move forward with "Facing Today – Dreaming for the Future", a three-year church engagement project that will explore what it means to be the church in the years ahead. It is likely going to make for some significant changes in how we are the church together. But all of it is meant to help us become better disciples and create better structures to allow us to do that.

This process will give us a chance to refocus on the central things and shape a church that lives out our faith in ways that speak to our communities more clearly. We have the chance to change our culture so that church is no longer a destination for an hour a week, but a gathering of faith communities in which we practice our faith. We hope to engage with people that we never have before and listen to voices that have been on the margins for too long. It is a chance for all of us to help shape the church of today and tomorrow into a place that meaningfully helps us grow in faith and our ability to follow Jesus.

I think it's exciting and hopeful.

I also think that it's scary.

Because we don't know what exactly it will look like. We don't know what it will cost us, to use the language in today's reading. And make no mistake, it will cost us. It will cost us more than money if we are serious about following Jesus.

It's never easy to be creative or to change our assumptions or habits or cultures. It's never easy to challenge the established traditions or to let new people take leading roles. It's never easy to build, and certainly never easy to take a chance on something that we can't understand.

We worry about looking foolish – about not finishing. We would do almost anything to avoid being embarrassed. We would probably just want to do the easy thing and go back to everything just as it was in the "good ol' days" even if it wasn't particularly useful or successful.

But Jesus calls us to something more than the same old story. Jesus calls us into learning who we are, who God is, where God calls us, and how God walks with us. Jesus asks us to follow even if we don't know the way or what we may find at the end of the road. Jesus calls us into a faith that matters and challenges us to be a community of believers who are constantly looking to grow in faith.

In fact, I believe so strongly that this is the most important thing we can pay attention to as a church that most of the MNO Synod's programs and ministries are geared toward the goal of understanding our purpose as the church, and forming people in faith – either through leading our own programs or supporting congregations in that work.

I hope that as we head back to our normal routines of work, school, and church, we will take Jesus' invitation to further our discipleship. As people of faith, it is so important to have a foundation in faith so that we can live out our baptismal calling each day around our classmates, coworkers, friends, family, and neighbours.

I want to close with something that German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. He says, "And if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? To answer this question, we shall have to go to him, for only he knows the answer. Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy."