

Sermon for November 13, 2016 – “Be Held”

33rd Sunday in OT, Year C – Mission Sunday – Texts: Luke 14:25-33

One of the things that I remember about being a kid is how particular my mom was about the house. She cleaned at least once a week...More often than not, twice. She did the floors, including the one in the basement, on her knees. That, she would say, is the only way to do them right. I especially remember the living room, it was always in perfect, pristine condition. Everything looked new and unused and the furniture was always up to date. There was nothing that had been handed down from anyone. Everything was new! Whenever we were in the living room, which wasn't that often, we had to be exceptionally careful not to disrupt anything. No throw pillows could be moved, no dirt could be tracked in, none of chachkies – you know, the little knick-knacks – could be touched. No signs of anyone actually being in the living room was allowed. At one point we actually had those goofy plastic furniture covers. I didn't understand what the fuss was about. I mean, why call it a living room, if no one was allowed to live in it? To some extent, now as an adult I still don't quite get it. What's more, I understand only a slight bit more the desire to keep one's possessions in good condition. Yet, Jesus's words on discipleship today certainly poke at our materialism, don't they? I mean, we like our stuff, and Jesus knows it. But, more to the point, He's calling us out on it!

In today's reading, Jesus once again takes us to task on our faults. He does this with His words on discipleship and possessions. What's different is the setting. Normally, the stories with Jesus begin after He's traveled to a new place. But today, Jesus is still on the road. He's somewhere between destinations, with a large crowd following Him. You can almost picture it, Jesus and the disciples, on to their next village or town to preach in, and a large group of people following not far behind. From Jesus's words to them we can guess that they were complaining. Complaining like their ancient ancestors following Moses through the desert about the journey. “Where are we going?” “When we will get there?” “What can we expect?” “What will we get out of it?” It sounds like they're wondering whether following Jesus was a good idea. They're looking for something out of the deal. They want the benefits of being followers, but so far all they have found is a walk through the desert. And so after hearing enough complaining, Jesus stops, turns and lays into the whiny followers behind him. He said, “Look, I didn't say this would be easy. In fact, I told you that you'd have to give up everything. Your homes, your families, your jobs, everything about your lives. If you're going to follow me that means carrying MY cross. You say you want to know what the plan is?!?! Yet, how many builders sit down and plan a whole project before beginning to build a tower? None. You want assurances that we're going somewhere worth going to? Yet, how many Kings sit down with an enemy army across the field and say, ‘Well, looks like we won't win, let's send out the white flag.’ None. If you want to be my followers, you're going to have to give up everything tying you to your old life.” Jesus lays it out plainly for the crowds. They cannot hold on to their lives before and follow Jesus.

Jesus knows that no builder can plan a whole project before it's started. Ever watch those home renovation shows on HGTV? You're always hearing contractors say things like, “Well, you won't know how much the renovation will cost until you open up the walls.” And yet the walls come down in search of show home living rooms and chef's kitchens and dream master bedrooms. Jesus is calling out everyone who's grasping for the next new and shiny thing to possess.

Think of all the wars being fought around the world for the sake of money and power. Think of all the people, soldiers and civilians, dying at the hands of rulers, or wannabe rulers, anyone trying to get or hold on to power. Jesus is calling out those who are holding on with all their might, and at any cost to power and control.

And now think of the church. Think about the things we hold on to. What is it about possessions? About the stuff we hold on to? It's this...The more stuff we have, the more we try to hold on to it, and the more we try to hold on to it the more the stuff holds on to **us**. The more people want the next new and shiny thing, the more they become slaves to them. The more people try to hold on to power, to be in control, to call the shots, the more they must descend into darkness in order to do so. And what about here in church? It's been said that in churches, the issue is never the issue...The issue is control.

The more that we see membership, faith, ways of doing things, ways of thinking, even God, as something we **have**, something we can hold on to or even **own**, the more it demands! And the more it demands, the more time, money, and energy we waste! We get trapped into a never ending cycle of keeping it all going at the cost of whatever it is God might actually want us to be doing or focusing our time talents and treasures on! Jesus says, if you want to be a disciple you need to give up all your stuff. You need to give up all the things you're holding on to because they'll ultimately hold on to you and drag you under.

Way back when I was in Boy Scouts, I went through lifeguard training. And, the one thing I remember is that when someone's drowning, the absolute **last** thing you do is jump in the water after them. The proper sequence is...Reach – with a pole, or stick, maybe an arm or leg...Throw – a rope or life preserver...Row – which means finding a boat...Then, go – but only as a last resort! Why? Because in their panic – they might pull you down with them! Many a would-be hero has inadvertently become a second drowning victim.

Jesus tells us that what we need to hold on to is the cross. Not our own cross – **His** cross. We know that story. We know that Jesus carried it through the streets of Jerusalem and up the hill to Golgotha on Good Friday. But we also know that once He got to the top He stopped. He stopped carrying the cross, because once nailed to it, it carried Him. The cross held on to Him. It trapped Him. Just like all the things that we hold on to eventually trap **us**. Until, that is, Easter morning. And all of sudden, the cross that held Jesus became that which holds all of us! Jesus calls us to pick up our crosses because He knows that we **can't**, because His cross carries **us**. In a world full of possessions, all that holds on to us and drags us down, all that keeps us from being the people that we're created and called to be, all that keeps us from being engaged in and part of God's unfolding mission in and plan for the world...Power, control, status – pristine living rooms – egos, etc....In a world full of all that the cross is the **only** thing that lifts us up. The cross is the place where humans need to hold on, is met by God's need to give up!

Give up wrath for love, judgement for mercy, sin for grace, death for life. And here's the thing...Jesus calls His followers, which includes us, to give up our stuff. Not **necessarily** to literally empty our bank accounts and give it all away, but to recognize that the things we hold on to are holding us back, keeping us from seeing. They keep us from seeing exactly what, or who, is truly carrying us.

So stop holding on and just be held...In the loving, wide-spread arms of Christ!

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.