

Sermon
St. Mary's Nanoose
September 4, 2016.
Luke 14:25-33

Goodmorning. It's good to be back. And it feels like a new year to me. For those of you who are actively parenting and those of you who did, doesn't September feel more like the beginning of a new year than January? And so I thought I'd take this opportunity to look at the idea of *vow practice* as a way of looking forward to new and renewed practices that serve our spiritual life and relationship with God through God's son, Jesus Christ. "Vow practice" is the idea of committing to something or someone in front of a community – it could be two or three people gathered to witness. Somehow when we commit to a practice or activity or behaviour in front of others and in front of God, we are much more likely to take our commitment seriously. And we are more likely to ask for support when we need it.

As Goethe remarked, "Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back.... Yet, the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred once one commits themselves."

Today's reading from Luke speaks about the importance of committing to be in relationship with Jesus in very striking terms. If strong phrases like "hate father and mother" and "wage war" and threatening ones like "none of you can become my disciple unless...." don't capture our attention, I don't know what else Jesus could have

said to bring home the importance of committing to a life in which God is at the centre.

As in the parable of the sower where the growth of the seed depends on the kind of ground on which it falls, the growth in our life in Christ depends on how committed we are to following Him. And the stakes are high if we are to take today's reading seriously. We have to be "all in." This is not a cheap, off-the-cuff kind of 'commitment' to trying a new lifestyle based on a whim - "Well, let's just see where this goes," as if our commitment depends on *our own* satisfaction. Rather, what is required is a vow of allegiance and loyalty *to a person*; to Jesus himself. To truly follow Jesus is to make a commitment that may involve carrying the cross for others, giving up our lives for others, and sticking with Jesus when we don't know where life with Him will take us.

Like a vow in a marriage, Jesus is asking us to do the difficult thing and commit to Him and to God, without knowing in advance how things will turn out. For better and for worse; for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish for the rest of our lives. Can we make this holy vow to Jesus? To follow Him no matter what? To deepen our relationship with Him regardless of where we are asked to go, irrespective of what we are asked to do? Is this a vow we can make?

Our Scriptures both challenge and reassure us. Through them we are repeatedly told that we are beloved by God and though we turn away from relationship with God, our return is yearned for. This

is grace. And today we are asked to commit to God as God has committed to us. This is the challenge we are presented with.

Are we prepared? Are we willing to do the hard work of following Jesus? Of doing the work to keep up with Him? Of being willing to sit companionably in silence to get to know Him better? To read the Scriptures meditatively to discern the Holy Spirit speaking to us in this moment of time?

There is much to consider. What are the costs and consequences of being a follower of Jesus? Of entering into relationship with him? What does He ask of us?

In today's reading it is clear he is asking us to have integrity if we intend to become one of his disciples. Even if it means having to take a different path than the majority of people. Jesus asks us to be willing to forego the values of the modern world: Affluence (possessions), achievement (success) and appearance (fitting in/looking good). These 3 A's – affluence, achievement, appearance - are the way Marcus Borg captures the values that drive the modern economy and society. Jesus is asking us to do the opposite: Give up the focus on materialism and dedicate our time and energy to our relationship with God; to not worry about what others think when we spend our time in prayer, make financial sacrifice and attend to the needs of our neighbours instead indulging ourselves; and being prepared to carry the cross (which is never a crowd-pleasing move in any time or place). Yet it is the people who have adopted this kind of life that is in sharp contrast to the mainstream culture that inspire us and give us the courage to take up Jesus' invitation, his challenge.

I remember entering the church 22 years ago and people saying to me, "C'mon, Selinde, everyone's leaving the Church, why are you going in? You seem like a intelligent person, what has gotten into you?!" Today, it doesn't seem such a big deal, but at that time, it was scary for me to be doing something that others scorned or didn't understand, and didn't even want to understand. This is helpful to me now as I can imagine how difficult it can be for people to walk through the doors of a church; or even to be curious out loud about what goes on in a church.

The cost of discipleship is not cheap. Jesus warns his listeners today. The path is challenging; the doorway narrow. The commitment required is deep and ongoing. The building of relationship, the changing of a hardened heart takes time. Jesus has proven that He will go all the way for us; even to death. And each of us has to make our own commitment to what we're willing to do; how we want to be present for whatever God has in store for us.

While I was on holidays I read a number of inspiring books. The one that really captured my attention is by a Canadian writer called *"One Thousand Gifts: A Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are."* In the book, the author, Ann Voskamp, mother of 6, tells the story of how she moved out of years of depression by starting to notice and record all the moments she was grateful for. As she tuned her attention, her ability to notice and be present in the moments of her day and give thanks deepened, and her life began to change. This practice took great discipline and she went through times of doubt, anxiety, and lack of trust. Yet, she persisted. She had committed to a friend to

record 1000 things she was grateful for and she did it. As you can imagine, after the first few hundred moments she was grateful for, she had to dig deeper and open up more to see the grace in even the difficult things. And the result was that she was a changed person, and she wrote a wonderful book to inspire others.

One of my favourite all-time authors is Bo Lozoff who wrote a book I return to over and over again called *"It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice."* He says, " Changing for the better is not only within our reach, it is also among our prime responsibilities as members of the human (and I would add "Christian") community. It is downright sinful to give up on ourselves. The world needs us to become joyful and enlightened human beings. Like Paul, even after countless instances of "the evil I don't really want to do, I find I am always doing," we must hang in there and keep trying." In the community where Bo and his wife live, they have a saying - "You can do hard." What a radically different message than the one we are used to hearing where we're told we *deserve* a life full of convenience, ease and leisure.

In the reading from Luke this morning Jesus tells us that it isn't easy to follow Him. That's not even the point. The point is that to fully engage in relationship with God will take all of who we are so that all of who we are can be changed into the image of God.

Sounds worth it, doesn't it?

Well, I don't know if it does. That's for each one of us to decide.

I'm just suggesting that this beginning of a new year might be the perfect time to make a vow to change one thing that is getting in

the way of your relationship with God. Each of us will have to discern for ourselves what change or discipline we are being called to undertake. Are we called to a discipline of prayer, Scripture study, community service, reconciliation, or the work to change a behaviour that does not serve us or others?

For me, I like the idea of deepening my recognition of, and appreciation for, God's action in my life. I am going to journal 1,000 things I'm grateful for; knowing in advance that it will be challenging for me to give thanks for things I assume are not good for me; for experiences that are difficult. But I can do hard. I am asked to do hard. And I've been assured I will not be alone in my endeavours.

We can all do hard. So many of us do and have done hard. Life is full of suffering. The question is, can we offer up our suffering to God? Can we let go of our ideas of how life "should" be and give thanks for the life we've been given?

This week one of our family died - Babs. And as hard as it is to know we won't see her wonderful spirit in the flesh again, we can give thanks because we know that, and I quote Desmond Carroll, a former dean of the Yukon as he said, "As we were sustained and comforted in our lives by love, there is a greater love that waits on the other side of the threshold," and for that we give thanks and for that Love we are willing to do hard.

Amen.