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LENTEN SERMON SERIES

One of Many or Your One and Only?

Luke 14:25 - 33

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Skyline Presbyterian Church

My boss related a story that happened to her recently. She was taking her granddaughter for a meeting with a guidance counselor. The talk turned to things that distract and the easy availability of technology. He opened his desk drawer and said, "Do you see where my cell phone is? I keep it in here because it's been shown that when a cell phone or any of the latest devices are out in the open, our minds are distracted and we cannot fully concentrate upon the subject at hand. So, I keep my cell phone out of sight when I'm at work so that I can concentrate on my students." I began to think, "What is it that distracts us or keeps us from staying focused? What is it that keeps us from making Jesus our one and only?" In His teachings Jesus tells His disciples and all those in hearing of Him what it means to be His follower.

Read: Luke 14:25-33

Hate. That's a strong word and it's the first thing that hits you as you read this scripture. The question immediately comes to mind, "Is He serious? We have to hate all of those who are closest to us to be able to follow Him?" What does Jesus mean? Do I really have to hate my grandma; my mom, my dad, my siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles to be able to follow Jesus?

Before we get into that I want to back up and briefly look at this whole chapter because all of it is talking about the cost of following Jesus. In the first story Jesus is with some Pharisees, it's the Sabbath – the day of rest, and as they come upon a sick man Jesus poses the question, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" Ever since the law was first given by Moses it had to be interpreted as to how it fit in to everyday life. As time went on and society changed it fell to the rabbis and religious leaders to interpret the Law for each new situation that arose and so now we come to this story about Jesus and His question to the Pharisees. Jesus is directly challenging their strict religious beliefs and juxtaposing it against God's higher law.

That's the first thing this chapter shows us about following Jesus. To be a follower of Jesus means that we have to be open to having all of our religious ideas and opinions challenged. Things that we have been taught from our childhood about the Bible, about God, about Jesus, about what Jesus demands of us, what the Bible says about social situations and people within society – to be a follower of Jesus means that we have to be open to finding that Jesus' opinion about all of these things may be quite different than what we thought. Often it's our strict religious beliefs that hold us back and can disqualify us as followers of Jesus. These Pharisees had always been told that the Sabbath was a day of rest; no work was to be done. Now they are confronted with a sick man, begging for help and it's the Sabbath. All of their teachings are challenged in one moment. Everything is not so black and white anymore.

The story continues about seating at a banquet. In all of society in that time whether Jewish, Roman or Greek, you always wanted the best seat and so it was not uncommon to see someone who was a legend in their own mind, going for the place of highest respect. Jesus says, "No, when you come into a banquet, find the lowest seat and let the host invite you up." As Jesus said, "...learn to be the servant of all." Then there is the story of a man preparing a meal and inviting all of his friends and colleagues, who may in turn invite him to their homes for a meal - a seemingly nice exchange. Jesus says, "No, invite the ones

who can't repay you – the poor, the lame, the infirm.” This reminds me of Isaiah where God talks about fasting and how it's not just a time to mourn and go without food, rather a true fast should be a time when you feed the poor, break the chains of the oppressed, help the downtrodden. To follow Jesus is to be open to having social conventions challenged and upended.

The next story is about a rich man who holds a feast and sends out invitations to all of his friends and colleagues. This would have been done well in advance of the day of the banquet however, as this story tells us, the exact time of arrival was not communicated until the day of the banquet when all was made ready. To not show up was not just rude it was a huge social insult to the host. The first declined because he had purchased a piece of land. True, no one wants to buy something without first seeing it to make sure it's worth the price being asked. The next man had bought some new oxen for his farm and wanted to make sure that they would be effective when it came time to plow. The third man had recently gotten married and felt obliged to spend time with his new wife. All of these are worthy reasons not to come but each one of these knew of the banquet well ahead of time and yet each one made the choice that property, animals and marital duties were more important than their relationship to the host. Is it any wonder that the man who was the host became angry and upset? So he sends his servants to the public square, the roads and byways to bring in the poor, the lame, the blind, the social outcasts and he even says “compel, (or force them) to come in.” He says this because at that time it was unseemly for a person of low social standing to accept an invitation from someone of much higher rank so it was necessary for the servants to force them, to insist that they come, that they were indeed welcome.

To be a follower of Jesus means that we are often times having fellowship with those we would normally consider “beneath us.” To be a follower of Jesus means that as sinful as we are nevertheless, the Spirit compels us to approach the throne of grace because we are welcome. To be a follower of Jesus means that we too are called to sit at the table and commune with the Master. Above all, to be a follower of Jesus means that we put our relationship with Him, that spending time with Him is the most important thing in our life and all else is secondary. This now brings us back to our scripture reading.

We come now to this troubling statement: “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, even his own life – he cannot be My disciple.” Really? I have to “hate” to be your follower? I think it's clear that in light of all of Jesus teaching He is not really saying that we have to hate our family. As every scholar points out, in all of His teaching Jesus emphasizes the importance of family and honoring our parents; taking care of one another. Even at His death He bequeaths the care of His mother to His closest disciple. No, it's not a matter of hate, it's a matter of contrast. We are called to love Jesus so much, to honor the relationship with Him above all others that it is almost as if we do hate the rest. This is a call to each of us to lay aside anything that would hinder us from following Jesus. Unlike the three men in the previous story nothing should come before spending time with God, breaking bread with Him, getting to know Him. As Paul says, getting to know “Him and the power of His resurrection.” Our days, our lives, should begin and end with Jesus. He alone is to be first. He should be our one and only.

The next sentence further defines this relationship. Jesus says that to follow Him we must carry our cross. Does this mean that we are to seek out pain, suffering and death? No. What this is talking about is the notion that we are to be willing to go wherever we are sent and to do whatever it is God asks of us. Even Jesus “learned to become obedient...” Our relationship with Jesus is to be so primary in our life that nothing, not even our closest relationships will hinder us from following Him and obeying Him. This is not always easy. Sometimes it hurts. I remember when my family and I were planning to go overseas, to live in Bethlehem. We were all excited and ready to go but on the other side of it, there were our parents, our siblings and other relatives from whom we were separating. Some of them didn't understand what we

were doing or why we were doing it and even got mad at us for wanting to go so far away. But we would not be deterred from the plan of God for our lives. Still, we had to deal with the fact that they loved us and a lot of their anger was that they would miss us and didn't want to be separated; and we were going to miss them as well. To think about the pain that they were experiencing by us going made us hurt too. Still, we knew that this was what God had very clearly called us to do and we had decided to not let anything keep us from this.

That brings us to Jesus' next statement – counting the cost. To be a follower of Jesus is not something that is to be done lightly. We need to recognize what He is asking of us. He gives the example of a man who wants to build a tower. He starts to build and then finds that he doesn't have the wherewithal to complete the task. How humiliating. I know of people who started following Jesus and had big plans but for one reason or another, they found that they just couldn't run the race; they found that it was costing more than they had planned on and turned back.

Jesus asks of us nothing less than He was willing to pay – everything. It may cost us our strict, rigid, religious beliefs to find the freedom that God holds before us. It may cost us our preconceived notions about other people, other cultures, to find a fellowship and love that we never could have imagined. It may cost us that big business deal or interfere with the plans WE have for our family, to find a relationship with the Eternal One that is beyond value. It may cost us our life; we pray this every time we say the Lord's Prayer. "Our father, who art in heaven, sanctify Thy name." This is an old Jewish prayer and when those words are spoken we are actually saying, "God, glorify Your name and if it means with my life, then so be it." It does cost to follow Jesus but what we have to lay aside is of so little value compared to the immense riches of God's grace, how can we do any less than to make Him our one and only?

(Moment of silence)

Amen.