

SLIDE – CROWDS AROUND JESUS

The people liked Jesus. They followed him around in throngs. They hung on his every word. They watched as he healed and freed people from their diseases. We wonder about the nature of their hopes in relation to Jesus' ministry. Were they looking for someone who would improve their individual situations? Were they looking for a personal healer? Were they looking for a leader who would just make their own life better or one who would transform the whole of creation?

We gather today at the beginning of the school year which helps us to come together after enjoying the beauty of summertime. We are excited about new classes, teachers, workshops and all that comes with the rhythm of this season. We gear up in usual manners and in new pathways. We look forward to how God's love will shape us in this year.

But the gospel reading looks like it will spoil our enthusiasm. Hate family? Say goodbye to possessions? How you relate to God and one another is at stake! This shocking saying comes as a conclusion to the whole chapter of Luke 14. Let's take a look back in this chapter.

SLIDE – PERSON WITH EDEMA

One day Jesus went to dinner with those who guarded the rules of religious life. To them following the rules was the most important thing. Rules like "Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy." The rule keepers didn't allow any work on that day. At dinner on the day of rest, a man waterlogged with swollen joints approached Jesus to be healed. Jesus healed him. It was a miracle. He asked those watching what they would do in a similar situation. Jesus point was to encourage them to say "goodbye" to their way of setting limitations and instead be more thoughtful in dealing with the world in need.

Jesus new order allows for getting to know the person, getting to know the need, and finding a way to work out the solution which is merciful and compassionate. This sounds great but by creating this new order Jesus challenged the norm of the day.

SLIDE – SUBVERSIVE JESUS. Jesus was disruptive and subversive yet people were excited and enticed by what was occurring. In that day they would struggle in

defining their relationship to God and to him. When we struggle with following Jesus we are in good company.

In Luke 14 Jesus told a story about people who like to be seen and be honored in public. His disciples may have already been rejected because they followed Jesus. The rule keepers didn't want to give up their public honor. The disciple would do well in humbling the self, keeping their eyes on Christ, and learning the way of divine love. The disciples were hearing this new way and grappling with incorporating it into their lives.

SLIDE – MINISTRY TO POOR – SERVING SOUP

Next, Jesus told people to invite the poor, the crippled the blind and the lame to dinner. Jesus spoke up for the least and most vulnerable in society. He spoke up for those who did not have voice or power or position. Those who had voice, power and position did not immediately like what Jesus said and did. They struggled with this word of Jesus.

Then Jesus told a story of people being invited to a great dinner of God's but for those invited, the invitation interrupted their busy lives of plans and sudden opportunities such as the acquisition of land and livestock, the transitions of marriage. They were not willing to give up their plans in order to attend the great dinner of God. With the banquet ready, the host went out instead to invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. Because these were surprised by the invitations, the ones without voice, or power, or position needed to be assured that the host was serious and seeking their inclusion.

In all these stories there were some who assumed they had met all the conditions and were part of the kingdom. There were others who were helpless and down and needed to be assured that the kingdom was theirs. At this point, Jesus turns to the crowd and seems to say, "If you want to be with me, then you have to hate all your family and give up all your possessions." If you do this, then you shall live. Jesus was encouraging them to do all they could in their whole life to follow him. Jesus knew it meant sacrificing. He was challenging his followers to consider the greatness of the kingdom movement.

SLIDE – PREFONTAINE QUOTE

Recently I was ready to leave for a Cross Country meet when I ran a quick errand at the grocery store. On my way out a young man called after me, "I like your quote." On the back of my fan t-shirt was a Steve Prefontaine saying, "To give anything less than your best is to sacrifice the gift." He excitedly told me how in playing hockey he found it didn't matter if he wasn't the biggest or fastest but that when he hung in there and kept persevering he would be in the right place to make the play or score the goal. Perseverance mattered and it helped him win.

Jesus was encouraging those who would listen to realize the magnitude of their following and the manner in which they were to follow. "Give all of yourself." The conditions of following sound too steep. The law tells us to do something, measures what we have done, and then judges our worth by how well we have measured up. Using this system, if we have done what the law says, then we are worth a lot. If we have not done it, then we are not worth anything.

We all have many conditions in our daily lives. We live under the law. We poke fun at those who cannot figure out how the system of conditions works. We depend on the system of conditions to work properly. But it is possible to meet the conditions yet not receive the reward. This is disillusioning, hurtful, maddening, and we complain that life isn't fair. We struggle with these daily conditions yet we understand the system so we live with it. Then Jesus goes and says things that upset our understanding of daily conditions.

SLIDE - FAIL

All of these conditions are too much for us. I need my family and they need me. We cannot imagine life without people to love and people to love us. Jesus's saying must be out of order. If we hate father and mother, we meet Jesus' conditions, but then we do not meet the older divine condition that tells us to honor father and mother. Here with the same action we meet one condition and fail the other. Whatever we do, we fail and we are lost. We cannot truly follow Jesus and keep the commandment!

We are judged as not measuring up according to the law. The wages of sin is death. We cannot achieve life, a life that lasts. Instead, in death, we are the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, those in need who stand on the outside. We are the sinner—those who do not have life with God.

SLIDE-CROSS

Jesus challenges our patterns of life that lead to death. Jesus welcomes the sinner and dines with them. Jesus invites the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame to his great dinner. He invites those who fail to meet the law's conditions. When we fail to keep the law, we find that we are driven to the place where Jesus welcomes us. How can he welcome those who fail? How can he welcome us?

SLIDE-WELCOME

He can welcome us because he went the way of the cross. He can welcome us because he took on our condition to the point of death on the cross. He can welcome us because he was welcomed by God from death into life, not by meeting a set of conditions, but by receiving the full mercy of God. Jesus' life, our life, the true life depends on God's mercy, not on what we do or hate or give up or say goodbye to.

Because this is so, we depend only on God's mercy, which is Jesus crucified and risen for us and for the world. This is life! There is no condition, like, if we depend on Jesus, then we get life. Jesus gives us life because he is risen to life.

We begin our lives in Christian baptism as recipients of this life and promise that we will be God's children forever. We are given the Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, and filled with dependence on Jesus. We depend on Jesus for the worth of our lives and for whatever goodness we exhibit before God and others.

Life is not what we make it. We do not depend on family or possessions for life. Life is what Jesus makes it – death and rising, the welcome of sinners, mercy, love, forgiveness, and being filled with his Spirit. Being filled with Jesus' Spirit, we find we can give generously of all that we are and have for our family and friends, for our neighbors and world, for the air, water, land and creatures. We are givers because we have been given much.

SLIDE – PALMER QUOTE

We will find that we easily fall back into the conditions which are all too familiar to us. "I'll scratch you back if you'll scratch mine." "Say you are sorry and I will forgive you." Not judging others and giving instead of demanding is not easy. But with Jesus it is possible.

Parker Palmer encourages people to take a step back and reflect when they notice they are doing the things they know they should not do. His method is a reminder of the struggles we face to do the good and the right thing. Too often we act without thinking because judging and demanding ways have become second nature. Jesus counsels us to look to a new way. To be treated with compassion when we are troubled or condemned is a most wonderful gift. It opens up new pathways.

There once were two young children who happily spent summers with their grandparents who raised ducks on their property. The things one could do in the wide-open spaces. Peter loved throwing stones at targets. One day it was a duckling. He never intended to kill it, but when he hit it dead center, the duckling lay dead. He felt terrible.

His sister had seen what had happened. Not wanting his grandmother to know, he begged his sister not to tell. But then she did something worse. Whenever Grandmother would assign them chores to do, Peg would quietly demand that Peter do hers, saying, "Remember the duck!" Peter obeyed until one day the guilt grew too large. He went and told Grandmother what he had done. He was surprised and relieved to hear her say, "O, I saw you do it, and I forgave you long ago." Like God, the grandmother was approachable, understanding, loving and forgiving. She was filled with mercy, a mercy she had known in her own life, and one she now freely gave to her grandson.

SLIDE - COMPASSION

Every day we will be challenged by old ways of conditions in our interactions. So every day we need Jesus' mercy to turn us to depend on all that God is and all that God gives, as we become people of the kingdom way.