

Proper 18C – The Cost of God’s Mercy

Collect: Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Lessons: **Track 1:** Jeremiah 18:1-11 – I (the Lord) am the potter
 Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17 – You (O Lord) created my inmost parts

Track 2: Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – I set before you life & death
 Psalm 1 – Blessed are those who delight in Torah

 Epistle: Philemon 1-12 – I appeal to you on the basis of love

 Gospel: Luke 14:25-33 – Parables of the Tower and Waging War: Count the cost!

The Gospel for Proper 18C

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Give ear O heavens, and I will speak; let the earth hear the words of my mouth,
for I will proclaim the Name of the Lord, and ascribe greatness to our God.

How many of you have read Judith Viorst's book: Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day?

The story details a long list of misfortunes Alexander encounters, from finding gum in his hair when he wakes up, to tripping on a skateboard, finding a cavity at the dentist's office, getting criticized by his teacher, having lima beans to eat for dinner (which he hates).

It's the sort of day you and I could probably relate to – except for the lima beans, which I do like. Some days you just can't win.

I wonder if Jesus was having one of those days when we got to the Gospel reading. I know he sometimes had trouble with his family. His mom and siblings were worried about him and tried to get him to come home (at one point in the gospels).

I think for the most part Jesus loved his family and respected them. The way Jesus talks about God as Abba (Father) says something about the relationship he had with his own father (Joseph).

I think when Jesus was dying up on the cross and committed his mother to John and John to his mother – even in the midst of that really terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day – Jesus had the presence of mind to set aside his own pain, his own grief, his own sorrow, and make sure his mother and beloved disciple were both taken care of.

So I look at the Gospel and find myself somewhat perplexed and puzzled by about what Jesus says:

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

That word "hate" is a very strong word. It means to detest, and while some of us may have had bad family relationships, this still seems pretty harsh.

It is tempting to say Jesus was exaggerating or using hyperbole to make a point, and certainly he is, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't stop and look at it for a minute.

It's tempting to gloss over it, because, I don't know about you, but I don't like to think of Jesus being harsh or mean. Jesus is all about love of God, love of neighbor, being kind, being gentle, open, welcoming, generous, and all of that.

But if we yield to a temptation to gloss over what Jesus said, we may miss the importance of hearing what Jesus has to say – to us!

My Dad was a fairly soft-spoken man, but when he got his dander up, he would grow in stature; his 5 foot nine would become 6 foot twelve, his chest would expand in a way that would make King Kong jealous, and his roar would send Godzilla back into the ocean.

Jesus is doing that here. It's not that he's having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day. Perhaps He's worried the people may be confusing his grace and mercy with weakness.

There's an old story where Herod the Great is reputed to have said, "*The Lord likes to forgive sin; I love to commit sin; ah, the world is admirably arranged.*" We call that cheap grace, and maybe that is what Jesus is challenging us with, today.

You may recall last week we heard the parable of the great banquet and all the excuses people made for missing the wonderful meal. They had to test drive their oxen, or check out a piece of property that was coming up for sale, or get going on a belated honeymoon. So the rich man sent his slaves out to gather people from the fields, highways and by-ways. It was a "Y'all come," invitation.

The irony of the story is that those who were invited would rather be dead than go to the party. Has that ever happened to you? You've got an invitation to a party and you just don't want to go? It doesn't matter why.

Maybe you're too tired. Maybe you've been to too many parties already. Maybe you heard your loud-mouth uncle with all his political views will be there, or your aunt with all her gossiping and nit-picking, or your nieces and nephews who run completely out of control and ruin everything because your in-laws can't control them – or won't.

You'd rather be dead than go, so you make up some lame excuse – after all, you don't want to be rude, so you develop a headache or tell them you've got to get up early tomorrow to write a sermon, or something.

Not that I've ever done those things, but I've heard others will sometimes do that.

So we make excuses. We shrug our shoulders because, frankly, it just isn't important for us to be there. It isn't important. We're really not interested.

It's to these folks Jesus says, "Now wait a minute, maybe it isn't important to you, but don't you see? It IS important to God. God isn't satisfied with a house half full or (God forbid) empty.

"The kingdom is like this," says Jesus.

"God has prepared a banquet for us – for you and for me and for our friends and neighbors and, when it comes right down to it, for all those strangers you find lost in the weeds.

"God says, 'Y'all come,' and if there are those who don't want to, that's fine. Let them make light of the invitation. That's not going to stop the meal. That's not going to stop the party. God has Leviathan roasting on the spit, so let's get a move on!"

That brings us to the Gospel today, where Jesus tells us we need to hate father, mother, and so on. When Jesus says something that sounds like fingernails on a chalkboard, we want to cover our ears like the lady on Jaws, but that's really the time to put our hearing aids in and listen.

Jesus isn't telling us to literally hate these people. We know that.

Jesus is very clear that we are called to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus is real clear that “neighbor” includes those we’d rather be dead than let them touch us – no matter who that might be – even if they wear red hats, 49er shirts, or drive too slowly down Division.

The Gospels are full of stories detailing family love: Jairus who begs Jesus to come heal his daughter. The Syro-Phonecian woman who begs Jesus to come heal her daughter. The widow who mourns the death of her son. The man whose son suffers from epilepsy, who begs Jesus to do what the disciples could NOT do.

What these family members all have in common was their willingness to die for the sake of their families.

“I don’t care if I’m a dog,” says the woman. I’m nothing; Help my daughter.”

“I don’t care if I am a ruler of the synagogue,” says Jairus. “I am nothing; Help my daughter.”

“This is what God is like,” says Jesus. “The feast has been prepared, and maybe there are those who would rather be dead than to show up. That’s fine. There is MORE than enough for everyone else. Forget those who would drag you down, including your family if it comes to that. You’ve got to be willing to let them go. Why?

“Because God is building a tower. God has considered the cost. You may look and say, ‘Hey, there’s not enough,’ but God knows the cost. We’ll see that on Good Friday (if we keep reading).

“God is going to war with Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness. You may look and say, ‘Hey, you’re going to need more soldiers; you’re going to need a bigger boat,’ but God knows the cost. We’ll see that on Good Friday.”

Because, here’s the point. It’s not about us. It’s not about the sacrifices we make. God has rolled up her sleeve; she’s got the shrimp on the barbie and rolls in the oven. The dinner is ready. The calf has been slaughtered. The tower is already up. The war is already won. Our job, our task, our privilege is to suit up and to show up! We start by dying to self. That’s the point.

Right now we are in that interim period between rectors. It’s scary. People are running hither, thither, and yon to do what they can to keep things going. There are committees to form, services to take care of, music to choose, newcomers to greet, bills to pay, linens to wash, and all that sort of stuff.

It can seem so overwhelming. There are those who want to slow down and catch their breath, and others who want to run off and get things over with yesterday. That’s who we are. That’s what we are.

It can feel like everything is resting on our shoulders. It can feel like everyone is relying on us to “get ‘er done, Dude” whatever “it” is. But John Wayne’s not in charge here. Jesus is. Jesus is the bishop and shepherd of our souls – not the Duke.

Jesus knows the cost, because Jesus paid the price in full. Jesus knows the cost of everything and, what's more important, Jesus knows the value of everyONE.

Let me say that again. Jesus knows the cost of everyTHING, and the value of everyONE. What we need to do is learn to "Let go and let God" (as they say in 12-step programs).

That's what Jesus means by us giving up our possessions. I mean, if you brought the titles to your cars, homes, and bank accounts to church today in anticipation of today's lessons, I appreciate that (and I'm sure Maggie can handle those transactions for you, if you wish), but Jesus isn't talking about that stuff. Jesus is talking about letting go of the things that hold us back from being the people God calls us to be, the people God knows we can be – for the banquet is ready.

As we'll see next week, the sheep that was lost has been found. The coin that was lost has been found. All we need to do is go beat the bushes and tell the folks that not only is dinner ready, but God has paid for it all (tip included), and is looking forward to spending eternity with us – we, who were lost and are now found; we who were dead, and are now alive.

God has taken our terrible, horrible, no good, very bad lives and transformed them into Terrific, Wonderful, very good lives, indeed. And that's worth celebrating. Amen? Amen!

Sermon delivered by Keith Axberg to St. Paul's Episcopal Church (Mount Vernon, WA) September 7, 2025