All That Possesses Us

A Meditation on Luke 14: 25 – 33

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church September 8, 2019

“Give up all your possessions.” That instruction has been nagging me all week. “Give up all your possessions. Give up all your possessions.” It’s been whispering in my ear. I fully expected to look up at the sky and see it written plainly there among the clouds. It was especially on my mind because Lou and I moved this week.

I have made a promise to my spouse and to my friends, and I make this promise before you, that I will not move again without letting many things go. Many things. Like that giant box of Lego I’ve been saving for those “one day grandchildren.” I saved their train set and I saved the Lego…because it’s Lego, right? It will always be amazing. But a giant box of Lego weighs a ton. How is it that all those tiny pieces weigh so much? And did they multiply at night in the playroom over the garage while we were sleeping?

The other really heavy boxes? (Other than books…let’s just not go there) The other ridiculously heavy boxes were the photographs. That’s something millennials won’t really have to worry about. A phone filled with images is so much lighter. But there is something about holding a real photo in your hand. Much like holding a book. Feeling the paper. Creasing the corners. Underlining breathtaking prose. It’s just not the same on an e-reader.

“Let go of all your possessions and be my disciple,” Jesus says to the massive crowds who were traveling with him. Luke places this epic word of instruction at the end of a series of epic instructions. They do seem at first to be, if not disjointed, almost unrelated. Jesus says:

* Hate your family…*and some of the crowd drifts away?*
* Hate your own life…*and a few more find reasons to turn back?*
* Carry your cross…or we could say, walk to your own death? Even *as they live with a political system that routinely carries out public executions?*
* Give up everything you possess…*and we wonder if anyone is left from that original crowd?*

It reminds me of one of the toys I came across as we were moving. It was a series of stackable trays…for Lego. You would dump a bunch of Lego into the top tray (anything to get them to pick up Legos so you didn’t step on them with bare feet!) The top tray was a grid, and the pieces that could fit would fall through. Each subsequent tray had smaller openings. Gently shake the trays and soon all your Legos were sorted from big to small. I see Jesus’ crowd shaking out this way. I see myself and wonder which question would trip me up. Not as straight forward as Legos. Different questions catch me on different days, in different seasons.

Frankly, I wouldn’t make it past the first question. Hate my family?? Not going to happen. They can be a little annoying sometimes, but hate them? No…That word “hate” troubles us, but let’s remember Jesus’ era and the very common teaching practice of Semitic hyperbole. Jesus exaggerates in order to shock. He intended to shock the crowds then as he intends to shock us now. This Jesus, who led by example, pointing to his disciples and saying, “Here are my brothers, my sisters, my mother,” expects us to live in this same way.

Mark Davis, in his exegetical blog, “Left Behind and Loving It” writes about “Holy Hating:”

*…this call to discipleship is radical, implying that those who follow Jesus are not going to be making decisions based on “what’s best for me,” or even “what’s best for our marriage/family/children.” It may mean living in that “dangerous neighborhood” or attending a less achieving school, because a gracious presence is needed there. It may mean living more simply because one’s resources can be used better for others. It may mean making unpopular choices despite the protests of one’s family. This is real and critical engagement that Jesus is talking about, a stark contrast to the typical depiction of “the happy Christian home” where one’s faith is demonstrated by how committed one is to providing every possible advantage to one’s own. That kind of choosing, it seems to me, has to be cast in the strongest language possible, because we will domesticate the gospel and make it a matter of enhancing ourselves and our families until we hear this kind of extreme language and let it shake us.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Hate your family. No, not really. You don’t have to hate them, but you do have to choose to be part of a more expansive family. Recognize that as a follower of Jesus you have made a commitment to a group of people who need you. And you need them. A global family with global problems and global gifts. Set another place at the table. Always. Make the food go a little further. Leave the door unlocked.

Hate your family.

*Hate your own life*. That phrase leaves me speechless. The God of creation who breathed life into me when I entered this world, wants me to hate myself? Not at all. The God of life invites you into deeper fulfilment by becoming rooted in sacrificial loving, sacrificial living. It isn’t hatred of self, which is how we may hear it. It is choosing a God-directed life over a self-directed life.

After knocking the wind out of us with these two shockers, Jesus tells two parables. Maybe it’s a way of softening what he has just said. Maybe the stories are intended to let us all catch up with what he has been saying. Two parables: one about a tower and another about a king going to battle. While both parables are about knowing what you’re getting yourself into, knowing what it will take to reach the goal, there is a sub-plot and that sub-plot is *love*.

In the first parable, someone wants to build a tower. The purpose of a tower is for watching over things. A watch tower in a vineyard enables the farmer to watch for the marauding wild foxes. The watch tower is a symbol of safety, a symbol of care.

Similarly, the king does not want to take his soldiers into battle only to be needlessly slaughtered. The king does what is wise not only for his own sake but for the sake of those in his care. The king will send a delegate to negotiate for peace so that his people may be spared.

And so we go from the jolting hyperbole about hatred to “these counting the cost” parables with their subtle reminder of God’s love and protection. God has built a watch tower among God’s people. That watchtower is Christ, and God had contemplated the cost, and together God and Jesus would see it through, the building of this tower. Anyone remember these lines from Leonard Cohen’s “Suzanne:”

*And Jesus was a sailor, when he walked upon the water.*

*And he spent a long time watching from a lonely wooden tower.*

*And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him,*

*He said "All men will be sailors then
Until the sea shall free them"
But he himself was broken
Long before the sky would open
Forsaken, almost human
He sank beneath your wisdom like a stone*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

And so a wise king will not carry the people into a war that cannot be won, but will send a mediator to bring peace to the land. Perhaps the audience for whom Luke was writing could hear the depth of meaning in these parables. Perhaps we can, too. Perhaps Christ’s mission does not have to sink beneath our wisdom like a stone.

And as if that were enough sentiment for one day, Jesus says, “Are you willing to give up what you possess? Will your possessions save you? Lighten your load, and walk with me.” In our material world, we think of our “stuff.” For me - books and Legos, craft supplies and shoes. What if, as in the parables, there is another layer of meaning? What if it is more than the stuff we can touch and eat and wear, what if he also needs us to let go of other things too.

Suzanne Guthrie, author of On the Edge of the Enclosure, writes:

*What are possessions? Just my stuff? Or, do my possessions include more intangible things to which I cling - ideas, prejudices, opinions, the filters through which I see the world? Are my relational obligations my possessions? And does my family possess me body and soul? What does it mean to carry the cross? What is my cross? Is my own life my possession, my world's possession, or God's possession?* [[3]](#endnote-3)

But I love my ideas; my prejudices protect me; my opinions make me feel secure; my filters make the world the way I need it to be. I would hazard a guess that it is much harder for us to let go of these things than any possession we can name. Their invisibility leads us to believe they aren’t there. But unless we confess them, they will remain and they will weigh us down.

Love a bigger family.

Lead a deeper life.

Believe in a God who loves you enough to count the cost.

Follow a Christ who will free you from all that possesses you.

Allow life to choose you.

Thanks be to the God of life, in whom we live and move and have our being. Amen!

1. David, Mark. Left Behind and Loving It. September 4, 2019. http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/09/holy-hating.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Cohen, Leonard. “Suzanne.” https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/suzanne.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Guthrie, Suzanne. https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/leonardcohen/suzanne.html [↑](#endnote-ref-3)