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Luke 14:25-33
Hierarchy of Loves

It is kick off Sunday and the gospel text comes out swinging! There's no soft landing for anyone who has just returned from a summer of light beach reading - so put away your romance novels and murder mysteries. This is firebrand Jesus who is preaching no longer about the horrible heathens of far away Jerusalem, now he is preaching to the people who have been traveling around with him for days, and weeks, and months on end. Are you sure you are ready for kick off Sunday, for a new season of faith, and commitment, and service? "Wait, not so fast," says firebrand Jesus. He wants us to think this through before we come forward for an altar call and sign ourselves up for something we have not fully considered.

So Jesus gives us two images for how discerning and thoughtful he wants us to be. Imagine you are building a tower, or a new house, or even worse remodeling an old house – you would think it through, right? You would make a budget, you would hire an architect, you would gather the permits, (you would bribe the historical board – just kidding) and you would make a plan. This makes sense to us. Or imagine you were planning a war, or working on national strategy, or drafting legal documents, you would be meticulous in discernment, you would bring in the topical experts, and you would rely on all of the best information you could gather. Right? This makes sense to us. When making big decisions, when making important decisions, when making life-changing decisions, let's not be too hasty. In this passage, Jesus commends thoughtful discernment as one considers the call to discipleship. Firebrand Jesus lays out the expectations for those who have been following him around and considering the call.

So here is the call as set out by Jesus in Luke chapter 14 - 1) hate your family and your own life, 2) take up your cross, and 3) give away all of your material possessions. That's it – three is enough! If this were to be your first Sunday attending a church service, you dropped in, you heard this passage, you heard firebrand Jesus tell about the requirements for discipleship, then I am sure you would immediately, turn on your heels, leave the church, and say, 'nope, I'm good.'

This is a hard text but we like hard texts because they are interesting and they reveal things about Jesus that you have to study and dig into in order to understand. The questions that leap out after the first reading of this passage are, why would Jesus say these things, why would he say you had to hate your mother and father, and spouse, and siblings, and children when elsewhere he preaches so powerfully about love? Also why must we take up our crosses, an object representing pain and suffering and death, when elsewhere he preaches about his burden being gentle and light? And why do we have to give away all of

our material possessions when elsewhere he promises us abundant life? In this hard text, we get a glimpse at just how radical Jesus wants to be.

Some Biblical scholars suggest that Jesus preaches here using hyperbole to shock the listeners and help them understand just how different their lives will be as his disciples. There is hyperbole in that Jesus did not hate anyone never mind his nearest and dearest but they did not deter him from his mission. Hyperbole in that the disciples were not crucified on crosses but Jesus suggests selflessness and even sacrifice must be expected. Hyperbole in that Jesus was not known to be a strict ascetic and he still entered into households of wealth and the halls of power but they did not compromise his calling. No relationship, no amount of suffering, no golden ticket would be able to lead him astray. And that is the kind of focus and dedication and sacrifice Jesus is asking disciples to make. But think it through, Jesus recommends, because this requires a grand reordering. Jesus wants to take the old ways of living, and seeing, and being, and completely turn them upside down – because he knows best, because he knows all, and because he loves us.

This summer I spent a lot of time trying to teach my five-year-old to swim. Slowly over the summer months she gained confidence, and my counting for how long she could keep herself afloat grew longer and longer until the counting seemed no longer necessary. Learning to swim has some very counterintuitive components, you have to move your body in unfamiliar ways and rely on the water to help you, and learn to breathe all over again. The water is a dangerous place but the joy of being held in the water, of moving through the water, of diving into the water is almost unmatched. Philip Booth has a poem called *First Lesson* about this exact thing.

*Lie back daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
and look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.*

Firebrand Jesus is trying to teach us a whole new way of being, but there are things about discipleship that seem counterintuitive and hard and even dangerous. Yet the teacher knows what we need to survive and thrive and live abundant lives. And so Jesus is asking us to reorder, reorder our loves, and begin again as his disciples.

We build our lives as these platforms of loves and interests and responsibilities. You probably remember learning about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – where the triangle is built with five layers, the biggest and bottom layer is the most basic needs – food, water, and rest. The next layer is shelter, security, and safety. Then comes the middle layer of relationships, friendships, and community. The next layer is self-esteem, confidence, respect, and accomplishments. The last and smallest triangle is self-actualization, reaching your full potential, finding fulfillment, and having creative expressions. Maslow says you have to start at the bottom of the most basic needs and move your way up.

Whether this chart is correct or outdated is debated, but we all have hierarchies as to how we spend our time and energy. It does usually look like providing for basic needs, building our homes, relating to and caring for family and friends, pursuing our professions, proving our worth, building our resumes, and collecting a hobby or two along the way. Sometimes the last and smallest platform in our lives, the leftovers of our time and energy go towards that category of self-actualization, or what I will call, the category of the soul. This is the category where we build a faith, where we connect with God, where we consider matters of the heart, where we discover our purpose, and seek truth and wisdom.

Firebrand Jesus wishes to topple that triangle over and completely reverse it. Jesus says that as disciples, our most basic need and the biggest piece of our lives should be our love for God, our faith in Him, and the health of our soul. This is where we must begin and build our foundation from there. These other loves of yours – your family, your job, your possessions, your hobbies, must be secondary to your love for God.

As the builder considers their plans for the tower or the king considers their plans for battle, so Jesus wishes us to consider our plans for building our lives. What foundation will we set, what interests will we pursue, what values will we chase, what dreams will we fulfill? How will you put this all together? Our self-reliant nature or our independence driven culture tells us that the best way to build our lives is to flip onto our stomachs and swim with the power of *our* legs and *our* arms, kicking and striving as hard as possible to the places we want to go. Jesus says this is not the way to live, the way to survive, or the way to eternal life – lie back, says Jesus. Lie back and be held by a God who is trustworthy and faithful. Be held by a God who knows you and formed you. Be held by a God who loves and calls you. Let go of the things you cling to, let go of the false gods and

shallow truths, let go of your need to be perfect, let go of your need to impress, let go of your need to accumulate. Let go; lie back.

Jesus Christ has come into the world to show you a different way to be. A way where your love for God is your foundation and from that strong platform you will be able to float above the stress and the turmoil and the change, which will invariably befall you. From that platform you are able to more fully express your other loves – love for country, and family, and nature, and mission, and all of your other passions and cares will be supported by your strong faith, and values, and life of discipleship. Jesus tells us that if your love of God is primary, it will soundly hold you and the things in your life, which truly matter. Lie back.

As you consider the platforms of your life, as we kick off a new season of faith, I wish you not to hear Jesus as harsh and firebrand. The call to discipleship is hard and costly but this call offers you far more than it requires. I wish you to hear Jesus as the one who knows best, as the one who knows how to swim when you do not, as the one who will never abandon you when the tides turn, as the one who wants for you, life abundant and life eternal. I wish you to hear Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who has gone before you and charted a course where love and joy and salvation have all been made possible.

Christian discipleship will sometimes seem like too much. And when it does, what sustains us is the faithful witness of Christ himself. We will not live up to his ways, but we can keep reminding each other of what he has already done for our lives and our salvation. He did not allow family or friends to divert him. He carried the cross on which he would die. He was stripped of all possessions. He accepted the full cost of discipleship on our behalf because his love for God was primary, foundation, and unwavering. And we have been called to follow in Christ' footsteps and order our lives according to his loves.

Love of God first and the rest should order itself.

Amen.