

## POSSESSED NO MORE!

A Sermon by Rev. Victor H. Floyd  
September 8, 2019

### Luke 14:25-33.

*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; 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 you have enough to complete it? Otherwise, when you have laid a foundation and are not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule you, saying, 'This [person] began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what ruler, going out to wage war against another ruler, will not sit down first and consider whether they are able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against them with twenty thousand? If they cannot, then, while the other is still far away, they send a delegation to ask for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*



### INTRODUCTION: THE COST

You can feel it in the air: it's back-to-school time. Anyone feel it? How does it make you feel? Excited? Nervous? You know that teacher who always assigns too much work, the one who demands so much it makes you want to cry? It is no accident that today's scripture marks the beginning of the school year, the program year, and it's a doozy. I say this because the term disciple means *student*, and Jesus is the teacher<sup>1</sup> we *thought* we wanted, but now that we're in class, he's gone all Advanced Placement on us. This is Graduate-Level Jesus. On the Luke 14 syllabus, he starts with the fine print:

- *To be my student, you must give up all your possessions.*
- *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my student.*
- *Whoever comes to me must hate mother, father, spouse, children, brothers and sisters and even life itself.*

What happened to Sunday School Jesus, the one who will give me rest? What happened, and why is Jesus calling us to this costly course of study? The course description reads like this: "Stop worrying about life after death until you learn to live life *before* death. Those who pass this course will know what it means to have a purpose, to follow Jesus, to be free."

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<sup>1</sup> rabbi (teacher)

Are you still in?<sup>2</sup> Classroom analogies aside, I want to share a story with you that I first told here about five years ago—new wine, vintage skins.<sup>3</sup>

## THE CALL

At my cousin Wynelle's funeral in Plainville, Georgia, circa 1972, I sat on the hard pew in the Baptist church, clutching my mother's side. I was eight years old. I had never seen so many flowers! Pink, blue, white—lilies, chrysanthemums, gladiolas—surrounded Wynelle's open casket where her body was front and center, so that her family might bid her farewell and then release her home to Jesus. Southern funerals are peculiar to people who don't know any better.

Wynelle's *immediate* family was escorted to a special pew behind a screen so that they might grieve without being observed. Even I think that part's weird. Why not grieve in the open? She's dead. We loved her. We're sad. There's no shame in crying, especially at a funeral, and, for the record, I want lots of crying at mine!

Just before the service started, as the Hammond organ played tremulous hymns, there arose a kerfuffle in the back of the sanctuary. In comes Sonny the florist, all the way from town, informing to funeral director, "We almost didn't get this one done in time!" Sonny sashayed up to the front of the sanctuary to place the large yellow rectangle of flowers, outlined in white carnations, affixed to styrofoam, on which a pink toy telephone had been attached, with the receiver off the hook. A rather impressive banner of ribbon draped across the flowers and in glitter, these words: JESUS CALLED AND WYNELLE ANSWERED.<sup>4</sup> I asked my mother to explain this to me, but her eyes grew huge. She looked through her purse, which was what my mother did to distract herself, hoping not to be noticed as she began shaking the pew, laughing. My mother was famous for laughing at inappropriate times. I loved her for that.

Y'all, it was a pink Barbie phone and a glitter banner.

My mother took a deep breath and smiled lovingly, "The Baptists don't all believe the same as we believe.<sup>5</sup> We'll talk about this later, okay?" And she gave me the motherly arm squeeze reminding me to be reverent. For the next few weeks, whenever the phone rang, I was afraid to answer it. What if Jesus was calling for me? Would I have to leave my parents? What if Jesus calls my parents? Would they leave me? Imagine my relief when we got an answering machine. Now Jesus could just leave a message, and we could get back to him on our schedule. If only it worked that way!

## MORE COST

In today's reading, Jesus, as if he's never heard of the ten commandments, says to hate father and mother, [partner] and children, brothers and sister, even [hate] life itself. That's a call that comes with a high cost. Since love is the greatest commandment of all, this verse requires some college-level interpretation. Here goes with my attempt.

In this passage, the original Greek word for "to hate" (*misei*) requires a comparison, an either-or choice, like in an eye exam: "Which is better *this* or *this*, *this* or *this*?" I love *this*, I hate *that*. By saying "hate this, hate that" Jesus is demanding that we love him best, more than we love anything else.<sup>6</sup> In this context, it would make more sense if Jesus had used words that mean to deny, to let go of, to relinquish, to de-prioritize. Christianity, after all, is all about losing in order to find, dying in order to live.

Jesus shocks the large crowd following him. "Choose me over the people you're with. Leave them, and be my disciple." Women grabbed their children, thinking that this sounds like a cult or, at best, some kind of irritating

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 2019, accessed online at <<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102135377571&ca=3b71e4fb-3fd0-4599-92fe-f4ebba7df5a8>> (September 1, 2019) *This sermon owes a lot to Rev. Duffield's inspired article.*

<sup>3</sup> A Bible reference. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Wine\\_into\\_Old\\_Wineskins](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Wine_into_Old_Wineskins)

<sup>4</sup> This was, evidently, a popular floral epitaph back in the day. I have seen it quoted elsewhere, such as in the movie *Sordid Lives* (2000), in which we see the funeral arrangement that reads "Jesus called and Peggy answered."

<sup>5</sup> We were Methodists. There are no Presbyterian churches in Plainville. You have to drive to Rome, Georgia to find the Presbyterians.

<sup>6</sup> *Strong's Concordance*, 2011, accessed online at <<https://biblehub.com/greek/3404.htm>> (September 2, 2019) "*to love less*"

holier-than-thou fanatic. But some of them got to know him. He's really not that bad, this Jesus. In actuality, he is worth it all. The extra work, the long nights, the misunderstanding, the steep learning curve, the sacrifices—he's worth it all. It's hard to put into words. Words cannot hold something as transcendent. That's why we have art.

## MORAL RESPONSIBILITY TOWARD THE COMMON GOOD

After his death, during the first centuries of Christianity, the Early Church focused on two things: 1) resisting the Empire and 2) exorcism. By the 3rd century, the Christian church in Rome personified Satan as the goddess Roma.<sup>7</sup>

Empires are greedy and govern with fear. That's what *our* empire is doing to refugees<sup>8</sup> along the southern border, the ruthlessness, immoral disregard for human life. Moral responsibility has gone out the window, but moral responsibility, creating true shalom—aka, *agape* love—is the greatest thing following Jesus is about, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Today's lesson is about getting our priorities right with God, and damn the cost.

## GO WHERE THE PAIN IS GREATEST

In less than a month, a group of Calvary people will travel to Tijuana to offer our support to immigrants. Thanks to the session (that's our board of directors), you will be given the opportunity to contribute financial assistance for things we'll buy once in Mexico: food, clothing, medication, personal hygiene<sup>9</sup> items, toys. Yes, we are going because we are a "sanctuary congregation." But more than that, we go in order to follow Jesus.

We want to at least try to give up our families and our usual lives, if only for a few days, to be disciples — those who learn about Jesus by following him: the one who trespassed into Samaria, the one who broke the law and healed on the sabbath, the one who relinquished possessions for the common good. Every time I try to pour a little bit of myself out to help someone else, I become filled with more than I could ever describe. You can experience that same bizarre feeling of freedom: free from old scripts, free of myself, free, if only for a moment, from the quiet desperation that's eating us alive.

## CARRY THE CROSS

"Carry the cross," Jesus says, so it must be a blessing. This empty cross is a multi-layered symbol. Here, heaven intersects the world. The human who died on it was the incarnation of heaven. Fully divine, fully human. Carry this cross with you, says Jesus. Remember this. There's a spark of heaven in you, too. Heaven and earth intersect in you. Carry this with you, and you will do great things following Jesus. True discipleship worth the cost. Come home to who you are, who God made you to be. Release what possesses you. When Jesus calls, don't let it go to voicemail.

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,<sup>10</sup> calling for you and for me;  
See, on the portal he's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me.*

*Come home, come home; ye who are weary, come home;  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!*

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<sup>7</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Turner, *Saving Paradise* book tour lecture, accessible online at <<https://www.georgehermanson.com/Paradise-Article.pdf>> (September 1, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> Anna Stirmov Durbin, "Is the U.S. Border Crisis a Mass Atrocity?" *Jewish World Watch*, July 12, 2019 <<https://www.jww.org/blog/is-us-border-crisis-a-mass-atrocity/>> (September 8, 2019)

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Buncombe, "Trump administration leaves menstruating girls 'bleeding through' underwear at detention centres..." *The Independent*, August 27, 2019, accessed online at <<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-immigration-migrant-children-border-lawsuit-period-tampon-latest-a9081341.html>> (September 1, 2019)

<sup>10</sup> "Softly and Tenderly" words by Will Thompson, c. 1880, music by Frank Rogers & Josh Turner, c. 1980s

*Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, pleading for you and for me?  
Why should we linger and heed not his mercies, mercies for you and for me?  
Come home, come home; ye who are weary, come home;  
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling, O sinner, come home!*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This version is from the movie *A Trip to Bountiful*, sung by Cynthia Clawson.