

SERMON: Great Expectations  
TEXT: Luke 14:25-33

9-4-22

*If you can dream it, you can do it!* This affirmation, often spoken by highly successful people to encourage children or young adults, I find particularly maddening. I have no quarrel with encouraging children, but this statement is misleading. It doesn't tell the whole truth. There are many rungs on the ladder of success, only one of them labeled *dreams*.

I once knew a teenager who dreamed of being a famous actor or singer or both. She loved movies and music and live theater, and she became fascinated with the artists involved. She talked often about her ambitions, and when she was met with less-than-enthusiastic responses, she accused her listeners of not believing in her and of crushing her dreams.

But it wasn't that we didn't believe in her. The problem was that a dream was all she had in her tool box. And she had very little interest in auditioning for community theater or taking dance

lessons or music lessons. She tried these things once or twice, but after a few weeks or months, she would stop participating. She had a dream, but no drive to support it. "Fantasy" would be a better word to describe it.

The most difficult thing about today's gospel lesson from Luke comes early on in the passage. It is just one word, but a very powerful word, spoken by Jesus. HATE.

Luke writes that there were large crowds following Jesus when 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."

As if the word *hate* wasn't bad enough by itself, now Jesus applies it to our family members, the ones for whom we tend to feel the most love. Jesus makes *hate* for our families a condition of discipleship! The very idea stops us dead in our tracks. It shakes us to our core. It is downright heresy in our minds. Not

only are we unable to hear anything else Jesus says after that, we *refuse* to hear anything else Jesus says. Like children, we close our eyes tight and put our fingers in our ears, and make whatever noise will drown out whatever Jesus might say next.

But let's take our fingers out of our ears for a moment. This is one of those times where the language and the culture of the time are of great importance in properly understanding this text. The message from Jesus about hating one's family is, according to biblical scholars, "Semitic hyperbole." Jesus is exaggerating and using the shock value of the statement to get the listener's attention. As one scholar wrote, " Jesus is clearly not telling the crowds to hate their parents and abandon their children. He is simply confronting them with the priority of their commitments and implicitly pointing them to the new surrogate family they join as they become disciples." (*Texts for Preaching - Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar,

Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome)

Furthermore, it's entirely possible that many people following Jesus in this crowd have simply gotten caught up in the excitement of others. This Jesus is performing miraculous healings and teaching in a way that they have never heard before. He causes quite a stir in every town he visits. He is a rising star, and his presence sparks the flames of curiosity and anticipation. People are swept up in the moment and have jumped on the bandwagon to hear what Jesus might say next. To see what Jesus might do next.

And Jesus wants to make it clear that following him is not a spectator sport. It is a long-term, wholehearted, whole life commitment. Following Jesus will be costly. Following Jesus will require a great deal of sacrifice. Following Jesus will demand a re-ordering of one's priorities. The decision to follow Jesus is one that must not be taken lightly.

The Old Testament Lesson from Deuteronomy, labeled, "The Great Farewell Address of Moses," has a similar message. Yet, the tone is much more positive. Let's hear this passage again.

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may

live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”

Certainly, the consequences of disobedience are more harsh than those presented by Jesus. Moses declares, “You shall perish,” where Jesus simply states “you cannot be my disciple.” Yet, the overall emphasis lifts up the benefits over the costs. “Choose life,” Moses encourages, “so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him, for that means life to you and length of days.”

Of course, the audience to whom Moses speaks is in greater need of encouragement. Having traveled for forty years through the wilderness, they are weary and worn. And now they are facing a change in leadership, as well as their long-awaited entrance into the promised land. Even when you know you’re moving to a better place, the transition can be daunting. Jesus, on the other hand, is speaking to a crowd with a much more carefree attitude.

The scholar I quoted earlier points out that Jesus' harsh words about discipleship come on the heels of the parable of the great banquet. In this parable, guests who received invitations to the great banquet offer excuses for their refusal to attend. The scholar comments, "But it is easy to be presumptuous about grace. The three who send excuses for their absence illustrate just how easy it can be to take lightly God's gracious invitations.... Therefore, to the 'large crowds' who 'were traveling with him,' Jesus delivers these sharp words about the demands and priorities of discipleship. If they are contemplating being more than hangers-on and intend to be regular diners at Jesus' table, they need to know what they are getting into and to decide whether they can sign on for the long haul." (*Texts for Preaching - Year C*, ed. Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, J. Clinton McCann, James D. Newsome)

Like that teenager who wanted to be in show business, sometimes we want to claim the title of Christian without doing any of the work.

Jesus has GREAT EXPECTATIONS for us. He sets the bar high. And he should. For his father has set the bar high for Jesus. We all have a cross to carry, just as Jesus did. But he is the only one who will be required to die on his cross. He will pay the ultimate price in giving up his life.

I have no doubt that Jesus wants us to love our families. But when we put Jesus first, above all else, he will teach us how our love can expand beyond our families, to our neighbors and our world.

As we accept the invitation to his table today, may we renew our commitment to love one another as he has loved us. To the glory of God!

AMEN.