

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

SWAPPING OUT OUR LIFE

Luke 14:25-33

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26“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. 27Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28For 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? 29Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31Or 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? 32If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Introductory narrative: Jesus makes a lot of sense sometimes, but when he expects his followers to hate our lives, he loses us. If there’s something wrong with life, if we’re supposed to hate our lives, then why does he go around *giving people back* their lives? Like, “Get up, little girl.” And, “Go to your

home.” And, “Go show the priests you are clean, and make an offering.” Why does he give food to the hungry and restore sight to the blind and make the lame walk, if not so they can get on with life? And if we’re to hate our father and mother, why did he restore the dead young man to his mother, and why did he love his own so much?

The air quotes are key. Actual video of Jesus delivering this talk would show him making that funny pair of little claws we curve through the air to show people we’re being ironic.

Jesus sometimes talked about life as the whole point of what he was doing. “That you may have life in his name,” John wrote his Gospel. But that was the sort of life we sometimes call “eternal,” because it doesn’t ever go away.

Not here. In this pericope, Jesus talks about “what you all think of as life.” To distinguish between these types of life, think of the former as being in quotation marks, as though indicating an ironic use of the word “life.”

In the same way, Jesus wants me to think of Maurice and Marcella as my “father” and my “mother,” because I am more truly a child of God than of them. And you, gentle readers, along with over two billion others, are more truly my brothers and sisters, by faith, than Noel, Sylvelin, Nathan, Byron, Rocky, and Gloria. (See Mark 10:30–“hundredfold”—this definitely needs expansion.)

Thus, what we receive upon entering the kingdom of heaven, or eternal life, whichever you call it, is life, house, fields, brothers and sisters, the world . . . In fact, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, “[A]ll things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

So, Jesus wasn't kidding. And the air quotes need to be *not* around "hate" but around "life," "father," and all our "possessions."

DIAGNOSIS: Second-Rate Life, or "Life"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Unfinished Business*

Jesus used two illustrations—a builder starting a house and a king going to war—which were not in the experience of his listeners, but I'm sure they could all relate. They knew how the future pushes back against us and threatens our best-laid plans. And they hated to be embarrassed. ("All who see will begin to ridicule.") That is how "life" was for them. That's how "life" always is.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Pinning Our Hopes*

As Jesus said, we plan our work and then we work our plan. If what you want is to win a war, well, plan for it. Build a house, well, draw up plans. Follow your dream, hitch your wagon to a star. Go for "it," whatever "it" may be that your heart is set on. Conventional wisdom, temporarily at least, is that one should pick just anything, and let that be your "thing."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *They Will Laugh at You*

In the long run, John Maynard Keynes used to say, we are all dead. (And now he is. See?) In the end, every general dies. Every royal gives way to another. Houses come down, even ones built of very fine stones and according to careful plans. What Jesus was saying is that, although we plan against failure, we can only hold it at bay for a certain length of time. "Life" is not forever.

PROGNOSIS: First-Rate Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Laughed Off Death*

Unexpectedly, Jesus confronted and went through our worst scenario, death itself—by which all plans get undone in the long run—and came out smelling like roses. The cross by which he died? He offers it to us to carry as well, as an indication and promise of our own resurrection.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Advanced Solution) : *Hope Built On Nothing Less*

The dynamic in this pericope is at this level—the level of the heart and of faith. Jesus yearns for all of us to let go of the other things we have made ultimate, and make him our Lord. For only thus can he give us, only thus can we receive, the life which is his goal for us. We are not free to begin living his life if we are preoccupied with other things; just as the carpenter cannot build a proper house until she gives it her total focus, as though she were a general preparing to meet an enemy in battle. Jesus was telling people to get off their cell phones and drive, something like that. Stipulate that your faith is in my cross, and you will have not “life” but life.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Unending Business*
Life is beautiful. Life is beautiful and good and free when we are not preoccupied with guaranteeing its temporal continuity, but with the brothers and sisters we have from God through Christ. Right here in this earthly sphere, we who have (not a chip but a) cross on our shoulder live like Christ, enjoying freely serving others. This is a business which does not end, because love never ends.