

Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with him; and 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 he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or 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? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Whenever I set out on a long journey, I like to have an overview of where I'm going. Back in the day, I'd use a good-old triple-A map. They still make them, you know. In later years, I'd print out directions on the computer using MapQuest. Nowadays, of course, we use the GPS app on our smartphones or built into our cars to plot the route for us. Whatever the method, we like to know where we're starting, where we're going, how far it is, and how long it'll take to get there. I hope this sermon serves as such an overview for the coming year.

So here we are on Rally Day, 2019. At Collingswood, like many churches, this day represents the start of our programmatic journey for the year. Gretchen has her plans for the youth set at least through Christmas. Will already has anthem and other musical ideas. Our Deacons and Elders are figuring out what needs to be done to maintain and expand our worship, our mission, our community outreach, as well as how to maintain our building and figure out how to pay for all this!

This is a joyful time at Collingswood Presbyterian Church and we are right to be celebrating today. These past few years have been difficult on many levels, but the times are changing and they are changing for the better. I guess for me, just like the Eagles, the regular season starts today. Kelly, Chris, and I are very excited to be here with you. This is the seventh congregation I've served during my ministry. I know some of you have been feeling a bit discouraged over the crises and other issues that have confronted our church over the past several years, but I must tell you that when compared with most of the churches I have served, Collingswood is blessed with an exceptionally strong staff and very dedicated leaders — more dedicated people, frankly, than I have worked with at any other church I have served. Over time, God did send good people to the other congregations I served, but, to use another football metaphor, you guys have the best starting lineup I've seen in a long time! Be glad. We have an excellent foundation on which to build. Let us look forward with confidence, because with God on our side, all things are possible.

And that, friends, brings us to today's scripture, two scriptures, in fact.

The passage from the prophet Jeremiah should be familiar. Here is where we learn about the potter's wheel and the potter shaping and molding the clay until he gets the result he's pleased with. I think the comparison with our faith journey is clear. As the old hymn goes: Have Thine own way Lord / Have Thine own way / Thou art the potter I am the clay / Mold me and make me after Thy will / While I am waiting yielded and still.

According to Jeremiah, God is the potter and we are the clay. As people of faith, we recognize that God is active in our lives and when we pay attention to God's leading, God will get involved with us, will shape us, will guide us, and ultimately will transform us into the women and men God wants us to be. That much is clear from the first verse.

But then comes verse three, which is not nearly as well remembered as verse one. Listen: Have Thine own way Lord / Have Thine own way / Hold over my being absolute sway / Filled with Thy spirit till all can see / Christ only always living in me

"Christ only always living in me." And that brings us to Jesus. Today's gospel lesson is one of the what I call, "squirmy ones." I say squirmy because Jesus is speaking directly to the people who came to hear him. Therefore, Jesus is speaking directly to us, to you and to me. Whenever he does that in the Gospels, I kind of feel like squirming. Jesus is very explicit and leaves no doubt about what he expects from us, "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." Wow. You can't be more direct than that.

And that's why it's so squirmy. Jesus wants it all. He demands that he comes first. Jesus wants to come before our parents, our partners, and our children. Jesus says he comes before our homes, cars, and bank accounts. Jesus especially comes before our jobs, our activities, and our recreation. Have no doubt, to follow Jesus means Jesus comes first.

Moreover, Jesus is explicit in saying that being his follower is not a spectator sport. It is not about saying the right words or giving money. Jesus tells us that to follow him, we have to "carry the cross." For each of us, an individualized cross awaits. For Jesus, of course, his cross meant the suffering he endured while giving up his life for our sake. But for you and me, our cross could be something quite different.

In keeping with Jesus' demand that we give up the people we love most for him, he wants us to identify whatever it is in life that we think we value the most: the person, place, activity, position, whatever — and then bring it to our personal cross. Once we have found the thing we value most, Jesus tells us to nail that thing to our personal cross and let it go. In other words, whatever or whoever stands in the way of having a complete and total relationship with Jesus must go. Period. Difficult words, indeed. Now are you squirming?

But if I am squirming, if you are squirming, why? Why should these words make us uncomfortable? Why should we hesitate, or doubt, or worry about the fact that Jesus demands everything from us?

If we worry, then we really can't sing, "Have Thine Own Way, Lord." Instead, we're singing, "Yes, Lord, but."

Friends, if this time of worship is to have any meaning, if this building is to have any meaning, if the work we do and the time and money we give to the church are to have any meaning, then we have no choice but to put Jesus first in our lives.

After Jesus demands we place him first, the scripture goes on to relate two parables Jesus told about planning and counting our resources. He talked about a landowner who wanted to build a house who, if he did not count the cost properly, would run out of money and be a laughingstock among his neighbors. Jesus also talked about a King who had to count the cost of raising and maintaining an army before he went to war, or risked being defeated and losing his kingdom.

And why not count the cost? For us as those who claim to follow Jesus; for this Collingswood congregation which claims to work on behalf of Jesus for the world, we must count the cost as well.

But what is the cost for us as individuals? What is the cost for this congregation? The cost for us individually and collectively is answering this question: Are we better off having Jesus first in our lives and first as the reason for the existence of this church, or not? Because when we dare put Jesus first, when we dare give up everything for him, when we declare in our hearts, minds, and spirits that Jesus is the key to our lives and to our futures, then we are saying, "Yes, Lord, you may truly have Thine Own Way"

But why, O why, should this be a hard question? Why should we fear giving everything to Jesus? Why instead cannot we trust — completely, confidently, and joyfully trust — that putting Jesus Christ first is the very, very best decision we could ever make?

Yes, we have doubts. Yes, we have fears. We wonder if we allow Jesus the Master Potter to have His own way with us, what will he do with us? How will Jesus shape our lives? How will He use us? What if, what if, he makes us into a cooking pot when we wanted to be a flower vase? What if we're a sippy cup instead of a wine goblet? What if God's will for you and me is different from your will for yourself and my will for myself? What if God's will for this congregation is different from the Session's will for this congregation?

Well, friends, what if it is? What if God's plan is different from our plan? What if we imagined our lives and living to go one direction and God takes us another? Well, honestly, "So What?"

Where is it written, who in the world says that our self-created plans are the best plans or the only plans for our lives? What makes us so sure that we always know how the future should work? How

confident are we that our choices are always correct and what we want in life is also what we truly need in life? In truth, we don't. We all have plans. We all have ideas. We all think we know what is right for ourselves.

Or, or, or, we can place our faith and trust in that Master Potter, Jesus Christ who will certainly give us a life quite different from what we imagined, but will also give us a life infinitely better than anything we can think of on our own. Don't worry, we'll be spending a lot more sermons and time digging into this.

But this is Rally Day, so while I address us individually, I also must speak to us as the larger group known as Collingswood Presbyterian Church. As we begin this new year, as we turn toward Jesus Christ and ask Him to shape us, what pathway might describe the direction we are being led?

As both your new pastor and as one familiar with the history and direction of Collingswood Presbyterian Church for nearly twenty years, I think I can at least partly answer the question of how Jesus is molding and shaping us. Over the years, churches have used various metaphors to describe how they see themselves in relation to the community. There are dozens out there. Using a few of these metaphors, I will describe what we are becoming. However, I'm going to start with what we are not.

First, we are not a Fortress. Fortress Churches make the interesting claim that they have such a unique and special understanding of Scripture and God that they and only they can proclaim the truth. Members are held to very rigid standards in terms of belief and behavior and admission to the church is tightly controlled. Fortress churches say, "We're right, and everyone else is wrong!" Some transform into cults.

We are also not a Lighthouse. Many churches call themselves Lighthouses because they seek to become witnesses to the True Light which is Jesus Christ and sincerely desire to shine that light on the world. The problem with Lighthouse Churches is they often put themselves on a higher level than the community. There can be a "smugness" about them that directly or indirectly says, "We have the answers, you foolish people out there. Come in and we'll correct you." Many Lighthouse churches do attract members, especially people who are looking for answers. At the same time, however, they are not so good at questioning their own answers. They have a hard time dealing with anyone from the outside who even hints that they could be wrong. It's much easier for the Lighthouse Church to say, "Sorry, you're still in the dark. Maybe someday you'll come around to our point of view."

Another thing we're not is a Haven. Haven churches are really more like clubs. People know each other, they socialize a lot together, they offer a break from the problems of life. They really don't challenge members much, both in terms of their own spiritual relationship with God or in how they get involved in the community. Mostly, they enjoy each other's company and fiercely resist change.

There are other metaphors, and we'll be exploring them. But let's jump to how the Master Potter might be shaping Collingswood Presbyterian Church.

Collingswood is becoming a Harbor. What is a harbor, what does it do? Harbors exist to tend to the needs of the ships and people that travel in and out. They not only load and unload cargo, they care for the sailors and passengers who are getting on and off. Harbors are places of refreshment, reequipping, and sending.

The Order of our Service for the Lord's Day reflects for us worshippers what a harbor does for both ships and passengers. We assemble in God's Name, praying, confessing and reestablishing our relationship with God. It's like the ship docking at a port and unloading and the passengers disembarking: they are home. We then hear the Word of God, where we, like the passengers, are refreshed and renewed and the ships maintained and refueled. In Church we respond by remembering what we believe and calling on God for help through our prayers. At the harbor, passengers and crew alike respond by preparing for the journey ahead by taking on new cargo, and making sure the way is safe.

One thing we do at church that does not necessarily happen in the harbor is that we engage in the Eucharist. Eucharist is often thought to mean "Holy Communion" or "The Lord's Supper." It's not. The word "Eucharist" simply means gratitude. You see, in church, we remember that who we are and all we have belong to the God who made us. We engage in acts of stewardship not just return a portion of God's many gifts to us, but we celebrate the Lord's Supper because we are grateful for God's ultimate gift to us: Jesus Christ. Finally, like the ships and people in the harbor, we leave this place and move back into the world. By the end of the worship in the church and by the time the ship leaves the harbor we have unloaded our burdens, been filled up and renewed, reoriented ourselves for the journey ahead, and finally go back into the world.

On this Rally Day, let us resolve to rally around Jesus Christ, the Master Potter and the reason we are here. Let us rededicate ourselves to following ever more closely to His way, His truth, and His light as we walk with Him through the fascinating journey we call life.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.