

The 16th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 23 (C)
September 8, 2019
Text: Luke 14:25-33

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

James Hatch is a 52-year-old former Navy Seal who is beginning his freshman year at Yale University this fall. He's a non-traditional student in just about every way. He's already had 26-year career in the Navy and arrives at school with a wealth of life experience—and some of that life-experience was tremendously difficult. He was severely wounded in Afghanistan, which led to going through surgery 18 times. But even more challenging was dealing with PTSD, depression, drugs and alcohol, which led to an attempt at suicide and time in a mental health unit. He said he wouldn't have made it without friends who were willing to endure the discomfort of getting in his face to say, you need help. Those friends made all the difference for him, and he's come to a point in life where he wants to develop his resources for giving back.

He said that, based on his background as a Seal, you're either an asset or you're a liability. You're either bringing something to your family, to your community, to your team, or you're taking away from it. He's says he's constantly thinking now, "What can I bring." (Fresh Air, NPR 9/4/19) He says that he wants to acquire the kind of education that can give him "a seat at the table" where important decisions are made—like whether to send someone else's kid into combat. He wants to be an asset, not a liability.

And in our Gospel story for today, Jesus is saying something similar. In three different ways, he says you can either be my disciple—an asset in God's work to heal the human family—or you can be a liability. And you know it just wouldn't be Jesus if he didn't call us to be an asset, not a liability, in a particularly memorable and unsettling way.

First, Jesus says, "You cannot be my disciple unless you hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even life itself." It might help when we recognize the Semitic figure of speech Jesus is using. Just as the expression in English, "kicking the bucket," has nothing to do with kicking or buckets, so in Hebrew the expression "to love one thing and hate another thing" doesn't mean there has to be anger or loathing. When it's used as a figure of speech in Hebrew, "to hate someone or something" means to turn away from it, to not prefer it, to not choose it. Jesus doesn't want us to hate anyone or neglect our families. Instead, Jesus is calling us to be completely clear about our priorities.

In Jesus' time, your family was supposed to mean everything. It was what gave you standing in society. Family was your source of economic security, your protection from danger. You were supposed to back your family, no matter what. But Jesus says that if we are to be an asset for God's work of healing the human family, we have to prioritize his way of forgiveness and compassion, his way of love of enemies and humility, his way of generosity and inclusive community, over obligation to family. Jesus' way of living must be more important than our social and economic security—more important even than life itself. Otherwise, we're a liability.

Secondly, Jesus says, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” For Jesus, the cross was the consequence he faced for being devoted to God’s priorities, God’s way of living. People who died on crosses were those who messed with the social order of things—like Jesus did when he crossed over social boundaries defining who was acceptable and who wasn’t, like when he welcomed foreigners, when he ate with tax collectors and sinners. People who died on crosses were those who caused problems for people with power—like Jesus did when he called out the temple priesthood for the way they used the temple as a cash cow, but were unconcerned about the poor and marginalized. For us, Jesus says, in order to be an asset in God’s work to heal the human family, it is necessary to prioritize his way of forgiveness and compassion, humility and love of enemies, generosity and inclusive community, over any potential consequences. Otherwise, we’re a liability.

And Jesus says we’d better consider the consequences of following his way of living; we’d better look before we leap. So he gives a couple of examples of considering the consequences. A person doesn’t start building a tower unless they know they’ve got the money to complete it. Otherwise they’ll get only half way done and look like a fool. And a king doesn’t go into battle against an enemy with superior numbers unless he’s confident he can win. Otherwise he’ll wind up defeated or dead. And we shouldn’t jump onto Jesus’ bandwagon unless we really are convinced that the only genuine human life worth living is the one that looks like Jesus—a life of compassion and forgiveness, humility and love of enemies, inclusive community and generosity. I believe that’s true—that’s the only life worth living.

Finally, Jesus says, “you cannot be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions.” And after putting family obligations in their proper place, and after accepting whatever consequences may come as a result of following Jesus’ countercultural way of living—well, giving up all our possessions ought to be easy. Except that it’s not. Separating “who we are” from “what we have” is complicated. The culture we live in invites us to imagine that we are special because of our stuff and our status. Our lives matter because we have a nice place to live or a nice car to drive or nice clothes to wear. Society also seems to say that people who don’t have those things don’t matter, so it’s very easy to become attached to our things. But unless we can separate “who we are” from “what we have,” our possessions can become spiritually dangerous because they open the door for us to prioritize them over Jesus’ countercultural way of living—specifically his way of compassion and sharing with those in need.

Now, it’s clear to me that Jesus did not require every person who followed him to give away everything they possessed. The New Testament is full of stories that take place in the houses his followers lived in, and tell about the food they shared, the clothes they wore, and the property they owned. I believe that Jesus’ call to give away everything is intended to be over the top, intended to grab our attention, but not received in an absolutely literal way. It’s equally clear to me, though, that in our consumer society, Jesus’ call to separate “who we are” from “what we have” is very challenging. It’s very counter-cultural! But if we can’t separate “who we are” from “what we have,” then we’re a liability, not an asset, in God’s work to heal the human family.

As I hear Jesus' call to be an asset, not a liability, I have to say that it sounds sometimes like an impossibly huge step—a giant leap that I can't even imagine making. And that's why I think it's important to recognize that following Jesus is a process—a life-long process. Instead of thinking of it like an on-off switch (you're an asset, or you're a liability), maybe we can imagine it like a dimmer switch—we are becoming disciples. Day by day, we seek to become more aware, to make choices that move us toward compassion instead of self-concern; toward forgiveness instead of holding grudges; toward love of enemies, toward humility; toward generosity and inclusive community. We are becoming assets in God's work to heal the human family.

And as I think about what it means to be an asset, not a liability, in our time and our place, one of the first things that jumps to mind is what Christ calls for us to be and do with regard to racism. Maybe you've heard about our "all-congregation read" for the fall. We're reading *Waking Up White*, by Debby Irving. It's one of the ways we're trying to move the dimmer switch for our life together by becoming more aware of what racism is, so that we can be more effective at being antiracist. If you didn't have a chance to pick up a copy in the Forum class this morning, talk with Pastor Melinda or me at the picnic after worship. We'd love to make it possible for you to participate.

I wonder where you see yourself in this journey toward becoming Jesus' disciple, becoming an asset rather than a liability? I don't know that any of us would say we're "there," but do you feel you're on your way? Are you taking baby steps, or does it feel like every step forward is followed by a step back? I find it really challenging to try to describe where I am in this life of following Jesus. But one thing I do know is that we don't make this journey by ourselves. God supports all along the way, feeds us with Christ's compassionate and forgiving presence at the table of Holy Communion; God meets us in prayer and worship to open our hearts and give us strength; God is with us in this community of faith, to encourage us, to comfort and reassure us. We're never alone in this journey, because God's work to heal the human family is the same work God is up to in each of our lives—to bring to birth in us the freedom and joy and peace of Jesus—so that we can experience the blessing of being an asset, not a liability. Thanks be to God. Amen.