

Conversations about Faith

Proper 18 Yr C September 4, 2022 Luke 14:25-33

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When they built the Confederation bridge linking Prince Edward Island to New Brunswick they started at both ends and worked toward the middle. We had a manse in the area at the time and many of the local people had doubts that the two parts would actually meet.

I mentioned that an engineer working on the project one day and he said that it took forever to move those large concrete pillars into place because if they were a centimeter off according to the satellite imagery they had to try again. And that work and planning meant that the end from PEI met the one from NB and formed the bridge we have been using for the last twenty five years.

This morning's gospel lesson contains two parables which are quite straightforward. The first is about a king building a tower. And if the king can't complete the tower it isn't merely a disappointment but a source of shame and ridicule. Because all it requires is some preparation to ensure there are the materials, the money, and the craftspeople in place to finish the building.

The second parable is about a king marching an army against an enemy. And that king has to be aware of how powerful the enemy is. Because if there is no chance of victory the king will have to find a different way to resolve the conflict.

And while it is probably easier for us to understand the first story the truth is that we can follow the second one as well. And they make sense. You don't get into a project you don't have the materials to complete- whether that be baking, knitting, car repair, household renovations, or building a tower. You don't undertake an activity when you have no hope of succeeding- whether that be education, sports, business, or defending a nation. Those things are easy to understand.

But like the other parables we find in the gospels, Jesus is not talking about a building project or international relations. No, like the other parables these stories are about faith. And that puts a different spin on them. But before we look at the stories again let me back up to the words just before them.

The reading starts with Jesus saying that we have to hate everything around us before we can follow as disciples. And that is confusing because those words don't fit with everything else we know Jesus says about love and service. And the word translated from greek into English as hate does indeed mean to despise, to reject, to hate. But it can also mean "love less" which makes the passage a bit different. Because that means Jesus says "Whoever comes to me and does not love their father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, less than me cannot be my disciple."

Now those words are still difficult but read that way they don't contradict the rest of the gospel. Because we know that we are supposed to love God more than our money, our houses, and the other things we have in life. And I know that when I add in family and friends and life itself it gets harder to hear and more difficult to accept but it still fits with what we know of the gospel message. Because we are called to love other people. We are just called to love God more.

And that leads into the line about taking up our cross. And we understand taking up our cross as accepting difficulties and troubles and burdens in our lives just as Jesus did. But like the parables this whole conversation is about faith. Because we are to take up our crosses in order to build the kingdom of heaven here on earth, to free others from suffering and pain, to walk in the way of Jesus and share his grace, his love, his salvation in our lives. So, there is a reason, a purpose, behind the things we do as we take up the cross and follow. And that brings us back to the two short parables.

The stories are common sense. We get that we need to plan ahead and to be aware of the costs and to know our chances of success. But remember these stories are not Jesus telling us some general good things to know- they are about faith and discipleship. So Jesus is telling us we have to plan ahead in our faith. We have to be aware of the costs of following. And to know our chances of success as we do the things we are called to do. And we don't always think of faith in those ways.

Jesus teaches that faith, being a disciple, is a process we are called to follow,

an undertaking we are asked to attempt, a difference we are to make in the world. And Jesus is up front with us about what is required to be a disciple. There is no surprise in the gospel about how we are to live, what we are to do, and what is expected of us. And Jesus never shies away from talking about the difficulties that happen in doing the right thing, being a source of grace, and how vulnerable we become when we dare to love others as God loves them.

And so the first parable is about us being aware of what God asks and what the call is about. We are to follow. To be the people Jesus asks us to be. To go the cross and to build a life of virtue and goodness. And that will take time and effort and resources. And we will have to be deliberate about it. Making space in our lives for prayer, for service, for growing spiritually. Doing what we need to do in order to be God's people in the world. Striving to ensure what we do is solid and firm in our lives.

And in the same way the second parable is about us being aware that there will be times of struggle in our faith. When we will doubt and be unsure, when we will come up against those who disagree with us and the gospel, and even when we will be mocked and ridiculed for being a Christian and following Jesus. And we will have to be aware of what we can do in response, where we can find the strength and hope to carry on.

And, and I want us all to pay attention to this point, we have to be aware of times when so much is in front of us that we have to find another way forward. And that may mean reaching out to someone else and sharing our uncertainty and worries, or admitting that we don't know what to do as we pray, or in being open to other ways to share the grace and love we are called to live.

For Jesus calls us to follow as disciples. To be signs of grace and examples of mercy in the world. To care for others and demonstrate the kingdom of heaven here on earth. To share in the promise and hope which God offers through Jesus and to live out our faith this day and every day. For Jesus calls us to follow with open eyes, open minds, and open hearts.