

Sermon for September 4, 2016
Luke 14:25-33

Looking at today's Gospel reading Jesus talks a lot about sacrifice. But taking a closer look—there's sacrifice and there's sacrifice, especially when Jesus talks about taking up the cross and following him. It's easy to associate Jesus' talk of the cross with sacrifice since he's on his way to Jerusalem where he will willingly sacrifice his life for us to demonstrate God's love for us.

So we correctly assume that his talk of "taking up the cross" implies sacrifices for those who identify themselves as his disciples. It could be the selling of our possessions, bearing the burdens of others, or even giving up our prior allegiances and relationships with family, friends or even country.

Sacrifice is something our culture has led us to believe to be a bad thing and so when we hear this passage it's easy not to hear everything. We hear about sacrificing and we think of pain, suffering and even death. And sometimes those are things that are part of suffering. But its more complicated than that. We've come to admire some people who make sacrifices like our Olympic athletes and our military men and women.

I remember from some of the Olympics that I've watched where they would show pictures from the athlete's life. We would see the early morning and late night practices, parents moving apart from one another to take their child to the best training facility with the best trainer. We would see that no expense was spared so that the youth could train with the best.

We also see and hear about the sacrifices our military men and women make each time they are deployed. We see parents separated from their children, jobs lost or lower pay taken. We see families moving from military base to military base without having a choice in the matter.

But even while we admire the people who make these sacrifices, our society tells us that there's no reason for the rest of us to make any sacrifices in this world that offers us instant success and gratification. And yet we all make sacrifices all the time. Parents sacrifice for their children to have a better life. Many people make sacrifices to get a higher education. People

make sacrifices to get married or to have children. We make sacrifices by not buying wanted things to save money to buy a house.

Not only do we make these sacrifices, we do them with a sense of joy. Why? Because there are sacrifices and there are sacrifices—some lead to greater life and some don't. But it doesn't mean that those leading to greater life are easy or fun or comfortable. We do them because they lead to a greater sense of purpose, of life, and of joy. Other sacrifices not only lead to less life, but sometimes to death.

Which helps us to look at this passage differently. Jesus isn't asking us to make meaningless sacrifices. He isn't asking us to be whiney about the cross that we bear. Instead he's inviting us to a Christian faith that stands against all those things that are presented to us as being life giving in our culture. Jesus invites us to the kind of abundant life that is discovered only as we give ourselves away. The kingdom of God that Jesus speaks about is about life and love. Just as love only grows as it is given away, so also genuine and abundant life grows as it is given away.

But we know that such sacrifices aren't always easy. There may be some around us who don't understand why we spend less on ourselves so we can give more to others. They may not understand why we'd invest our time and resources on someone that our culture considers to be a lost cause. The choices we make, the relationships we chose to make with others, the way we spend this life we've been given, could cause not only puzzlement but can also make our family and friends very upset with us. But we always have the question in front of us that Moses stated in our first reading from Deuteronomy to choose life or to choose death.

But the challenge in front of us is that the choice isn't always as clear as we would like. Sometimes we get confused about what is the right choice—the choice that gives life. Sometimes we hear Jesus' voice calling to us with the choice we should make, but it gets drowned out by society's voice telling us that success, possessions and security is what gives life. And sometimes the choices in front of us are just shades of gray.

Which is why Jesus goes to Jerusalem and makes his sacrifice for all of us. He does this to assure us of God's love and forgiveness, so that whether we are confused, overwhelmed, unclear or just make the wrong choice, we have the promise of life always in front of us. With God's promise of unconditional love, we are always free to choose life.

It isn't easy for leaders in the church to ask people to sacrifice—to sacrifice time to come to church, to sacrifice money for the sake of our mission, to sacrifice some of what we have so that others may have enough. It isn't easy now that our society doesn't support congregational life like it used to. Instead society offers us many other alternatives for where we can spend our Sunday mornings and many worthwhile charities where we can spend our money. It sometimes feels like an uphill battle, so why make it more difficult by asking our people to sacrifice. But just as love only grows as it is given away, when we sacrifice by giving of ourselves to others we receive so much more. We receive the sacrifice that leads to life—there are sacrifices and there are sacrifices.

I want to close with a quote about sacrifice and religion from Martin Luther: "A religion that gives nothing, that asks nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." Jesus gives us life itself, asks us for everything that we are, and suffers all for the other. It is worth all.