

“Downward Mobility”
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Luke 14:25-33
16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2016

In election season, I gotta say, it's refreshing to know that at least one person doesn't pander to the crowd. I know it makes it hard on churches trying to recruit – Welcome to Brown Memorial. It's Hate Your Family Sunday. But in a world where we are constantly be sold something, where we are the objects of messaging crafted to hit us our Facebook feeds with the right product at precisely the right time, it's refreshing to hear Jesus not care about the reaction he's going to get.

I know that some people say that's what they like about their favorite political candidate – he tells it like it is. She doesn't care what other people think. But even those candidates are usually pandering to somebody with promises they can't deliver and commitments they'll never fulfill.

It's hard to see how Jesus could be pandering to anyone with his call to hate your family and even life itself, take up your cross and give up your possessions. Hate is not really the best word here since the phrase has nothing of the emotion that we associate with hate. It's more about turning away from the things that bring you security, which doesn't make the text any easier. Following Jesus is going to redefine your life including your closest relationships. It's going to mean the loss of everything that you worked so hard to possess. It's almost as though Jesus wants the crowd to get smaller. It's like he *wants* some people to walk away. He doesn't want to go big. He'd rather work with a lean group of committed disciples than a multitude of lukewarm followers.

It's a hard strategy to buy into since everything in our culture is growth oriented included the church. We want a growing economy. We want spiritual growth. We want market growth. We want church growth. We want numerical growth. Not Jesus. He'd rather keep the bar high even if it means keeping participation low. The way of the cross is a process of downward mobility, a message, which I imagine is making the disciples awfully nervous.

Somewhere along the way they had started to imagine that following Jesus would lead to benefits. The benefit of a better reputation. The benefit of a bigger purse. The benefit of more notoriety. The benefit of greater security. The benefit of a better station. That's the way we often speak about faith – what it does *for me*. It makes me a better person. It improves my spiritual life. It helps me get through the week. It's almost impossible not to speak about faith this way since this is the way we judge everything – from jobs, to movies, to where we're going to go to college, to houses, to experiences to love relationships – how it serves me and my needs.

Following Jesus is different. You have to know from the beginning that it might not serve your needs. It could lead to a sullied reputation, a smaller purse, less notoriety, the loss of security, a lower position in the world's rankings. There's no easy way to share that news as a preacher. We dress it up as best we can, but discipleship costs more than most of us want to give.

Unlike a lot of what passes for spiritual knowledge on TV or in the self help section of the bookstore, Jesus sometimes creates more problems in your life than he solves. He sometimes brings more tension than comfort. He disturbs more than he sets at ease.

Which begs the simple question - why would anyone choose to follow Jesus? If Jesus doesn't bring you more and sometimes makes your life harder, not easier, why follow him? If following him doesn't convey special status and doesn't protect you from down mobility but actually encourages it, why follow him? If Jesus doesn't protect anyone from suffering for what is right and good, why follow him?

I thought about this question all weekend in anticipation of the historic announcement that I expect this week. Last week, I and others were enemies of developers and business leaders who resented what they saw as ignorant, unreasonable preachers and community members meddling in the marketplace. It wasn't just me. Some of you were there meddling with me. This week I won't be surprised to hear my name and yours dragged through the mud on the other side of the aisle by people who think we've compromised too much.

For me, what was most important in that process, was attending the celebratory opening of Turnaround Tuesday on the westside - BUILD's jobs movement that's led to 162 job placements in the last couple of years with an 87% retention rate. The second location is less than a mile west down Lafayette at Macedonia Baptist Church where on Tuesday I heard person after person tell their story of turning around. I heard a young man talk about selling drugs to pay the bills only to find himself using those drugs, in a gang, leading to 13 years in prison. When he got his first fulltime job, he asked to work the nightshift so he could get off on Tuesday to come back and help others walk the difficult path toward hope that he's walked. I heard a police officer confess his 10 year shame of locking up young men who were no different from himself as a young man before realizing his calling to take people off the street with the carrot of opportunity instead of the stick of jail. I heard a mother weeping for her gang-banging son who tried unsuccessfully to get out of the game and testify to how she worked and worked to open this second Turnaround Tuesday so that other mothers' children would have a different path.

They all told stories of repentance. Of turning around - that the definition of that little Hebrew word that our English Bible translate as "repent." To turn. To change direction. They weren't afraid to share their stories of turning around. Of forsaking the direction they had traveled in in order to follow God in a different direction. Leave behind their attachments to a different way with all of the fear that involves, all the courage it requires, all of the uncertainty it produces, trusting God to lead them.

At the negotiating table this week I thought about all the people I have met these last few years in east and west Baltimore who were willing to change direction. Willing to leave the drug corners. Willing to confess the sins of their past and seek forgiveness that leads to life. I thought about some of the leaders at the highest levels of power, willing to change the direction of their institutions, and embrace a different path toward building one Baltimore.

And I watched the Sagamore leaders in front me willing to change direction, bend to unprecedented terms and then I wondered am I willing to do the same?

The temptation for every human being, whether you are a dealer on the corner, or a developer in town, or a preacher in a pulpit is to want to be right on everything. Wanting to be justified in your decision to live the street life is not too different from wanting to be justified in your decision to suck up subsidy without responsibility, is not so different from wanting to be justified in your decision to oppose it with no intention of working together in good faith to bring to fruition real alternatives.

As I listened to another group worried about how it would look to bring back to their people anything less than winner-take-all, I wondered, is it better be right and gain nothing on behalf of those who need it the most, or is the better way to risk losing your reputation as pure and righteous in order to move the moral arc closer toward justice? It's a real question that, in this situation, will be answered by more than just me.

Even so, I wondered more personally am I willing to turn from the idolatry of always wanting to be right, the idolatry which poisons the left and the right, for something that serves God's purposes more than they serve my own? I shared that question with a friend this week, a marriage therapist, who told me that this question that I was wrestling with in the public arena is exactly the question that he puts before couples time after time. "Okay, you want to be right. I get that. Do you also want to have a relationship?" He observed that many decide they want to be right more than they want to be in relationship.

Which is why I can't let go of trying to follow Jesus and confessing that following him always leaves me convicted of how far I still have to travel. Because I know how Jesus looks at me in love and refuses to pander to my ego tell me, "you can't take anything with you where I'm going. You have to let it all go – your reputation, your safety, your precious need to be right, your stuff. You have to let it all go. Otherwise, you'll just be losing your life in the fantasy that you are saving it. You'll just be serving your own need to be seen as good and right and just under the illusion that you are serving others. I see who you are, Andrew. So let go of all that and follow me."

Let go of your attachments to family and learn to love them instead. Let go of your desire to make yourself great under the illusion of serving them and learn their stories instead, their hopes, their fears so you can truly serve. Let go of the false comfort that your stuff brings and learn to trust me with everything. Let it go.

That's where Jesus wants to take us. On that path of downward mobility. That difficult path that Jesus promises leads to life. I won't twist your arm to try to get you there. Jesus isn't looking for a large group. He doesn't want to go big. He'd rather keep a lean group of committed disciples than a multitude of lukewarm followers. But in a world where banner ads pop up making promises at every turn, where so much of our world is setup to pander toward our shallow wants, our scripted needs, aren't you curious to see where he'll take you?