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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 14:25-33

There has to come a time when we, as Christians, read a portion of Scripture and shake our heads in bafflement. Today's words from Jesus regarding discipleship seem quite irrational, if not borderline insane. Listen to them once more: "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" (Luke 14:26).

Hmmmm...well, for one thing, why would Jesus tell us to, in essence, violate the Fifth Commandment? After all, we've been told to honor our father and mother for as long as we can remember...and now we're supposed to hate them? Not exactly something I want to bring up in a classroom full of youths!

And then, how many times have we been told that we're supposed to be "pro-family"? Many in our country believe that the "traditional" family -- composed of a husband, wife, two-point-five children, Labrador retriever, and white picket fence -- is the backbone of a healthy society. Here, I think we can safely conclude that Jesus' pronouncement is not pro-family!

In fact, we may find a glorification or even deification of the family among our fellow Americans. This is, one could argue, a backlash against the dissolution of the traditional family brought about by skyrocketing divorce rates over the last several decades, among other factors. People point out how society seemed to suffer fewer ills when families were stronger, and conversely,

how society suffers more ills now that the "traditional family" has fallen apart. However, any decent researcher would be quick to remind us that correlation does not imply causation. There are simply too many variables to consider when looking at a matter as huge as the breakdown of American society; in fact, to reduce it all down to a handful of factors is quite irresponsible from the standpoint of social research.

Now, think about how irrational I'd sound if I asserted that Jesus is responsible for the breakdown of the family by virtue of the words he himself spoke! Of course, there aren't very many Christians out there who are so zealous and fervent that their faith has caused them to become estranged from their families completely. But I trust that you're bright enough to spot a logical fallacy or two, especially when such fallacies result from conclusions drawn from sketchy or insufficient data.

As interpreters have wrestled with Jesus' words since they were either uttered or recorded, we can conclude that Jesus was no stranger to hyperbole. This is, perhaps, the only way we can deal with this seemingly anti-family pronouncement. We might say that Jesus uses this language to jolt us into questioning our priorities. One question, therefore, would be quite clear: Is our family more important than God? Or consider a related question: Are things of this world more important than God? Jesus leaves us with that matter in today's closing verse -- "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:33).

Whew! The bar is set pretty high here, if you ask me. The word that springs to mind is "ascetic." Ascetic is typically used to describe the severe life-

style and living conditions common to monks, nuns, hermits, survivalists, and folks who've chosen to live "off the grid." An ascetic lifestyle means that you live with only the bare necessities and no luxuries, and those who practice asceticism in a Christian context will often point to the words of Christ himself to show that what they're doing is, in fact, consistent with his teachings.

If I could at this time make my own logical leap, I'd conclude that adherence to Jesus' call as found in this morning's text would lead Christians back to the lifestyle and economy of cavemen. If you can't have any money or possessions, you won't be able to participate in commerce, and, particularly in an agrarian economy like that of the ancient world, if you're not trading in grain and livestock, you won't be able to provide for yourself beyond a hunter/gatherer subsistence lifestyle. So one must ask, "Is this really what Jesus wants for us?"

Our text notes that "large crowds were traveling with [Jesus]" (Luke 14:25a), and, given that his fame had grown since the beginning of his ministry, one might conclude that Jesus is trying to weed out those who are merely casual or curious about him. Jesus isn't looking so much for inquiries as he is commitments; thus, today's text could be a way of Jesus saying, "Look, if you want to follow me, this is what it's going to mean -- sacrifice of family, relationships, possessions. Are you ready for that?"

Then, we look to ourselves, and we are reminded so often of our inability to carry out our Lord's commands. Moreover, we are taught by the apostle Paul, in particular, that righteousness comes not through adherence to the laws of the Old Testament, but through faith in Jesus Christ. So why would Jesus tell

us to do something that we likely could not do -- as well as something that would not save us? We might even wonder if Jesus is setting us up for failure...

Yet what if we aren't necessarily the casual and curious folks in the crowds who were there merely for inquiry instead of commitment? I'm assuming, after all, that we are members of the audience Jesus is talking to in Luke, chapter 14. There's always the chance that we might not be. What if Jesus had been talking to people with healthy relationships with their families and possessions? What about people with great wealth for whom God is still "number one" in their lives? It just doesn't seem right for Jesus to demand that all of his children ought to adopt some miserable austerity program just to stay on his good side!

After all, we're talking about the same Jesus who said, in the tenth chapter of the Gospel of John, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Thus, I can't help but think of this morning's Gospel text as something of an anomaly. When evaluated -- as Scripture should be -- in comparison with other texts, it just doesn't stack up against commandments to honor father and mother and to love one another. Take it for what it is -- as hyperbole, as an attention-grabber, or as a way of weeding out the casual and curious. See how it asks you the question, "Is God really 'number one' in my life?"

Remember also that this text stands in tension with some of our assumptions about the "traditional" family unit. Jesus startlingly challenges our tendency to deify the family. Knowing what we know from Jesus, we might want to re-

evaluate the importance we place upon some illusion of an ideal home...with a husband, wife, two-point-five children, Labrador retriever, and white picket fence. Is that equally as important -- or more important than -- God? And what about those called to live out their faith beyond the confines of a traditional family? For as bizarre as Jesus' words sound, there may indeed be people who leave behind father, mother, brother, and sister in pursuit of a holy calling. Obviously, this wouldn't be wonderful, but, for such people, it might be necessary.

We can safely conclude that, while family can and should be an important part of one's life, it isn't everything. Only God is everything. Only God can command our ultimate commitment and allegiance. Sure, God can also command us to honor our father and mother, even as his own Son calls us to hate them. But such tensions serve only to highlight just how much complexity and ambiguity can come with being a Christian...and how much we need thoughtful servants able to wrestle with these complexities and ambiguities.

And that's a big part of your calling as you ponder what it means to be a Christian...

Thankfully, God has given you a mind that is capable of reflecting upon his great mysteries, even if such reflection never results in total understanding. Indeed, Jesus still tells us today, "Use your head! Consider the cost of what you're entering into when you enter into a relationship with me!" (Luke 14:28ff.). And beyond this text, we have the great benefits of a relationship with God in Christ Jesus -- forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. If all this discipleship talk sounds too harsh, I'd ask you to merely consider the ways in which your life given to God is but a fraction of what he's given to

you. Thus, there is only one posture for us to take -- one of thankfulness.

Before you get too baffled by what appear to be mixed messages from Scripture, just use your head. After all, God gave you intelligence as well as faith.

Yes, you can be a disciple and remain obedient to the Fifth Commandment. You can be taken aback by the harshness of Jesus' pronouncements and abide in the knowledge that he loves and forgives you. In short, you can be a "both/and" Christian in a largely "either/or" Christian landscape.

If we know anything about God's great mysteries, it's that God makes this possible.

Amen.