Whenever I hear this gospel lesson read in church, I hope there is no one here for the first time or just getting introduced to the Bible. This passage is harsh and it's a bit disjointed. You have to hate everyone you hold dearest to be my disciple. You have to carry a cross to be my disciple. If you are going to build a tower, don't you first sit down and calculate the cost, to make sure you have enough money to complete the job? What king, getting ready to go to battle doesn't first compare the size of his army to the size of the army of his opponent? None of you can be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions. The Message Bible puts it this way: “Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.”

Wait a minute. How do all those demands fit together? And what about grace? What about not having to do anything to earn God's love? What about Jesus' death and resurrection opening the gates of heaven for us, without us having to lift a finger? Jesus' words here are some of what are called “the hard sayings of Jesus.” There are others that you will remember: “And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away, for it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.” “Follow me and let the dead bury the dead.” These sayings are said to be hard because they are so demanding. In all these places, Jesus uses hyperbole - exaggeration – to make a point. Does Jesus really want us to walk away from the people we love the most, to pluck out our own eye, to leave someone else to bury a parent? Of course not. Does Jesus have a list of requirements for us – things we need to do to earn his love? No. What Jesus is laying out here for his followers is how he wants us to order our priorities. In the case of the disciple being asked by Jesus to walk away from his father's funeral to follow Jesus, John Chrysostom gives this explanation: “This saying does not condemn natural affection to our parents, but shows that nothing ought to be more binding on us than the business of heaven; that to this we ought to apply ourselves with all our endeavors, and not to be slack, however necessary or urgent are the things that draw us aside.” In short, our calling to follow Christ is more pressing than anything else in this world.

We who are followers of Jesus are called to devote our lives to him, to remind ourselves and others that only in Jesus do we find true love and peace. In Jesus, we discover our purpose in life, as individuals and as a parish: to honor our Savior in the way we serve others. Why do we do this? Because Jesus loves us; he has given his very life for us and wants us to respond to his incredible love by loving others. This is why we are here on earth. Jesus knows how easy it is to lose sight of his plan for us. We look at people around us and decide their focus might be more our cup of tea. We see people who for whom family is everything, who build a wall of protection around their loved ones, who spend every single day focused on the needs of those they love most. You may ask, “Is that a bad thing? God gave us one another to love and cherish.” That is absolutely true, but when we only see the needs of those we are related to, we cannot relate to others who might need some protection and love.

Yet there is this: Success. Stability. Wealth. Our culture tells us these are the highest goals one can attain. On the surface, none of these is bad or wrong. It's when we make these things gods and worship them to the exclusion of everything else that we miss the point of God's kingdom: to empty ourselves so we are able to serve others in God's name. If we can't see those who need Jesus' love, how can we ever share it with them?

I like to walk in our town, for exercise and to run errands. Billy and I like to walk to get a bite to eat or listen to some music. From where we live, we can do all these things quite easily. Going out for these walks would be perfectly lovely if it weren't for the cars. Every time I go out to walk in our tiny little town, I constantly have to scan the horizon to make sure I am not brushed back or hit by a car. Even though it's the law to stop for pedestrians in a crosswalk, I often feel I am in danger if a car is coming and I venture out between those well-marked lines. Nine times out of ten, I have to stop in my tracks to let a car speed right in front of me across the crosswalk. When I walk past our town's gas station/convenience stores, often I will walk around to the back of the buildings to avoid cars exiting and entering the area where the gas pumps are. I used to think the way people cut me off there was hostile, but now I believe they simply do not see me, so engrossed are they in getting to where they need to be. I want to scream (and sometimes I do), “Pay attention!”, to get people to see me, to acknowledge that I am right next to their vehicle and that I have the right to cross a road or walk on a sidewalk without fear of being run over. When I see other people walking in town, pushing strollers or moving slowly or not even walking, but maneuvering a wheelchair, I worry about them, too. The point is this: it's not pedestrians' fault that someone driving a car can't see them. It's the drivers' job to see who is right there in front of them, making sure they don't hit anyone or anything.

“Pay attention!” I believe that is what Jesus is saying here to the crowds who have come to hear him speak. “Pay attention to me,” Jesus tells them. As the source of all that is good in this world, Jesus invites them to be wrapped in his loving embrace. Jesus tells them that when they are grounded in his love, all their other relationships will be stronger and more centered in his grace. “Pay attention to those around you!” When they pay attention to those around them, Jesus tells the crowds, they will see people who are not being treated fairly, people who are sick or lonely and need the healing touch of Jesus, people who could use a friend.

“Pay attention!” It's so easy to get distracted by our own problems and limitations, by the terrible things we hear on the news, by demanding jobs and family obligations. Jesus gets that. He got that when he talked to the people he met on his travels. He gets it when he calls to us, softly and tenderly, working on us as a potter works with clay, taking the spoiled vessels we have become and working us into another vessel, as seems good to him, a vessel that is beautiful to behold and that pours out all the love poured into it.

Amen.

*Pentecost 16C*

*August 4, 2016*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Church*

*Luke 14:25-33*