

“Hate your relatives?!” Luke 14:25-33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Sometimes when we read the gospels, we may wonder, how is this a gospel, how is this a good news? Some of things which Jesus said, let us be honest, sound quite shocking. The same we can say about our today's Gospel text.

Jesus talks about what it means to be His disciple. What it involves. What the cost of being His disciples is. Meditating upon this text we'll try to understand what Jesus was teaching us, and why He was saying these scary and almost unacceptable words.

We read that Jesus was addressing great crowds that followed Him. We should ask the question 'why did they follow Jesus?' They probably had many different reason. As we all may have different reasons to come to Jesus. The Gospels tell us that many people came to Jesus hoping for healing. And they received it.

Others came looking for justice, for advice, for help. Yet others came to listen what He was teaching, for He did it with authority, not as their rabbis. Some were looking for a hope, for Jesus words gave it to them. Some came urged by their curiosity, to find out who really is this man? Different motivations...

What is our motivation? Why are we here? Healing? We can receive it, the Lord willing. Wisdom? God gives it abundantly to those who search for it. Help in our problems? Comfort in our afflictions? Advice, hope, peace, forgiveness? Indeed, Jesus Christ is the answer to all these needs.

But the point is, and this we need to realize clearly, if we come to Jesus only for all these good and necessary things, then, in fact, we see Him, we see our God only *as means* to the end, as means to what we want to get for ourselves.

Then we don't love Him with all our heart and mind and soul, but, instead, we love ourselves with all our heart, and mind, and soul. Ourselves, and not God.

Of course, we appreciate His help, His concerns, we even trust that He is able to deliver what we need, but ultimately ... it is about us getting what we want with a help of Jesus. It is not about being His disciples. It is about us and for us. What is our motivation? Why do we come to Jesus?

Jesus knew all the reasons why people tried to come to Him. And these reasons didn't make them disciples of Jesus. That's why He addressed the crowds explaining what it means to be His disciple.

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

Wow! How about this rule? These are very difficult word. Do they sound Christian at all? If you do not hate your father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even your own life, you can't be Jesus disciple!

It may appear that it speaks against almost everything we can read in the Bible. Love your neighbor as yourself! Honor your parents? Love your children! We may wonder, how to reconcile what Jesus is demanding us to do with all these clear Scriptural commands?

Actually, it is not that difficult, once we realize what point Jesus is making and who He is.

We have been already before talking that in the Ancient Middle East a family was the most important structure of a society. Family. That was the highest value, and it is quite easy to explain.

If one lived in an agrarian society without all the technology that we have today, communal effort was very important. People within family depended one on another for survival. Parents of children, children on parents, siblings one to another.

A family was one's the most important network of relationships. Families required the highest loyalty. Families were the source of peoples identity, security and objects of ultimate allegiance. This was the cultural background against which Jesus was speaking.

Now, what was He saying? Other gospels are very helpful to understand what Jesus was teaching. Thus Matthew elaborates the same theme in a slightly different way: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Mat 10:37)

Matthew puts Jesus teaching in a different language. But essentially they both, Matthew and Luke, are making the same point. Jesus is demanding the highest allegiance. Higher than family, than parents, than children, even than your own life.

Jesus was saying 'if you want to come to ME "you shall love the me with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (Mat 22:37) Put it in other words, Jesus was stating that He is not just means to the end, to what we ultimately desire. He Himself was the end., the ultimate goal.

When Jesus used the language of "hating" your dear ones, He emphasized how much we need to love our God. He tried to highlight that we need to love Him, the Son of God, so much that our love towards our most dearest people and even towards ourselves would seem like hating. Our love of God has to be this deep and strong.

I admit, this sounds difficult to us. How can we love our God even more than our spouses, more than our children and more than our parents? For these are our the most important relations! How can something be even more important that they?

We can answer these questions if we understand who are we, what is our identity? How would we answer to the question: "Who are you?" People whom Jesus addressed usually identified themselves with regards to their families. It would be like this: I'm Guntars, son of Gunārs, son of Nikolajs, for the tribe of Latvians.

And how would we describe who we are today? By our relations, by what we do, by our hobbies? I'm Guntars, Jana's husband, I'm pastor in STP and GDB, I'm student in Concordia St. Louis. These all are correct answers, but they are somehow narrow and limited, they don't get to the core.

The first and foremost we are God's creatures. Don't deceive yourself, we are not something separate from God's creation. We are a part of it. Yes, very special creatures, created in the image and likeness of God, but still creatures.

This is good. This is a good word. It means that we have our Creator, who cares for us and gives us everything we need. He created and shaped us, He continually sustains our life. He gave us our parents. He gave us our siblings. He gave us our spouses and our children. All that we have, all what we are.

All of these are His gifts. So precious, so dear to us, so special, but still God's gifts. There are many gifts, countless gifts in our lives, but there is *only one Giver*, God the Father Himself.

When we realize that our primary identity is creatures of God the Father, then we see the reason why we do need to love Him more than anything. Because everything else we have received and continually receive from Him. That simple.

But what does it mean to love God? Is this some kind of feeling? Jesus Himself teaches that love is not that much about feeling, but about our actions. Yes, about what we do. What do we do when we love someone? We do everything to make them happy.

How do we love our God? The same way, we do everything to make Him happy. We try to live our lives as He has designed them. We try to be the best spouses, the best parents, the best children, the best in our work. We do all of this not to merit something from God, but because we have already received everything from Him.

When we understand it, it gives us wonderful freedom. We all know that nothing in this world is permanent. Everything comes and goes. Literally everything. If we attach our hearts to the gifts of God, one day they will be gone.

But as soon as we realize that we receive everything from Him, and He is God who loves us first and knows and gives what we really need, we are free to enjoy all His gifts, as long as we have them.

This is what Jesus means when He asks for the ultimate allegiance. But then He continues. “Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”

What is this cross, we may wonder? We can understand it from the context. Whenever we want to love our God more than anything, we may need to sacrifice some other relations and allegiances.

Those of you who come from non-Christian environment will easily understand it. My family also experienced it to a certain extent. When Christ is your ultimate allegiance, it causes problems. Inevitably.

When you want to live according God’s will in this world, with so many other gods, your standing, your values, your choices and actions will seem foolish to others, unreasonable and sometimes like obstacles.

Why to humble yourself and to forgive? Why to care so much about others? Why to choose a good conscience over a great deal of money? Why to be faithful even when no one knows? Why to go to church so often? Why do you do this?

This is what Jesus means by cross. To do His will even if it is costly for us. We may lose some very dear God’s gifts, if we want to be together with the Giver Himself. This is the nature of being a disciple of Jesus.

But again, just listen what He was saying as Matthew wrote it down: “Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” (Mat 19:29) And that’s so true.

Then in our Gospel text Jesus uses two parables, about a man who is planning to build a tower and about a king, who is considering a coming battle, to illustrate that this is not an easy way, to be His disciple, we need to consider it seriously.

To scare us completely He concludes: “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” Again, this is not about leaving good gifts or God, not about leaving families or possessions; it is about right priorities.

Jesus demands that our hearts belong to Him. Consequently He demands that we’d use all other gifts of God to serve Him, and to serve others in a way that is God

pleasing. And this is not easy. Because we still want to have the ultimate allegiance to ... yes, to ourselves, to our interests, to what pleases us.

How can then we become disciples of Jesus? How can we love Him more than anything? We are not capable of it. Not in this life. There is only one solution. If we learn how much He loves us. Yes, Jesus demands us to take our crosses, and we learned what they are.

But He also took a cross Himself. Not in a way we do. Not as little inconveniences. He went to the cross. He extended His arms and was crucified. He gave up His life so that only He can again be together with us. He took upon Himself what was separating us from Him, namely, our sin, and nailed it to the cross. He destroyed the power of death and rouse again. As the first among many others.

Jesus doesn't demand the ultimate allegiance only from us. First He Himself shows it. He gives us everything. There is no more left. He gave it all. And by giving it all He received back hundredfold, and much, much more. He received all of us as His family.

We are now His family. If we say 'yes' to His invitation to be His disciple, His family becomes also ours. We may lose some very dear gifts of God along the way, but we'll receive the Giver Himself and together with Him also hundredfold what we have left and we will inherit eternal life. This is Jesus' way of discipleship.

Let's be bold, let's trust Him, and say our 'yes'!

Amen.