

Proper 18
The Rev'd T.J. Freeman *SMMS*
Luke 14:25-33
Saint Paul's Episcopal Church
Cleveland Heights, OH
September 7, 2025

In nomine...

“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.” What a text to get on my first Sunday here at Saint Paul’s?!?! I am going to come back to this, because we should talk about it, but first I want to tell you a story.

On the 15th of July I was sitting in a Bioethics class at Saint Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, I was there for part of my Doctor of Ministry program. My phone buzzes and it is a text from Kristin Busa, from the Saint Paul’s Search Committee, that reads “Hi T.J. - do you have a moment this afternoon to chat on the phone?” Now if you have never been a priest in a search process what you may not know, is that after you have made your visit to a parish as a finalist, if someone from the Search Committee calls you it is almost certainly the *thanks, but no thanks* call. So immediately my day is ruined. Class is almost out, so I text Kristin back “I can probably call in 35 minutes or so.” I figure I want to eat a little lunch, before being sad. And she responds, “Great!” Now if I was a smarter man, I would have begun to sense that it just might not be what I expected. Because “Great” is a weird thing to say to someone you are about to give bad news.

Obviously, the story does not work out the way that I thought it would. Kristin was calling to make sure that I was still interested in being your Rector before the Search Committee nominated me to the Vestry. I was so shocked, that I know I did not sound excited at all on the phone. So much so, that I texted her back the next day to assure her that I was in fact incredibly excited. The thing is my friends, that I fell in love with you all while reading the parish profile, looking at social media posts, and speaking with a dear friend who used to be on staff here. After the visit to Cleveland, I found myself trying to protect my heart from being broken, if I was told that I would not be your next Rector.

From the moment I began speaking and interviewing with the Search Committee Saint Paul’s has felt like home—like the place that God is calling me to be. The place the Holy Spirit has been leading me and the place where I will next encounter the risen Christ. My friends, it feels good to be home. Sure, my life is a bit of a mess right now. On Friday movers delivered our household goods, which means that the design aesthetic in our house right now is “*pile of cardboard boxes*”. I still sometimes take a wrong turn trying to find someone’s office here. And there are several boxes of books left unpacked in my office. But it is clear in my heart that I am home.

Which is perhaps the greatest thing that the Church can offer to those who come to her—the knowledge that they have found a home, a home that is imperfect, but whose Lord is the Lord of life, of light, of love and joy. We, the Church, will never be perfect, but when we set our hope and hearts on Christ Jesus, we will grow to be like

him. I am not perfect; my kids can tell you that. I will disappoint you. I will be too liberal for some of you and too conservative for others. I will miss a call when you really need me. I will challenge you in ways that are uncomfortable, and I will grow uncomfortable when you challenge me. But I promise to strive to love each and every one of you as I love Jesus. Imperfectly, of course. But fervently and persistently. Repenting and trying again, when I fail. I promise to seek to create a space of welcome and belonging for each person at Saint Paul's—so that on that day when my tenure as your Rector has ended that we are more representative of the rainbow people of God, to borrow a phrase from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Today for my failings and shortcoming, I ask your forgiveness and absolution. I will, with God's help, and your love and support accomplish the sacred charge that the Vestry and you have entrusted to me.

Now, I did promise you that we would get back to the text. In the tenth chapter of Saint Matthew's gospel there is a slightly gentler version of this teaching, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me", but Luke is uncompromising.

He pulls no punches with his recollection of this moment, "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." There is no grey here. We cannot soften it. It is a shocking statement and that is just what Jesus intends, he desires for us to be shocked. Jesus wants the hearer of this parable to know that following him will not be easy and that if we are going to choose to follow him that it may cost us everything. It may cost us our familial relationships, our jobs, our security, our wealth, our social status—all of that is at risk when we follow Jesus.

This bears out in the reality that the next thing he says is, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Carrying the cross does not mean the same thing for us that it did for the original audience, they knew that to carry the cross was to be shamed, to be humiliated, to be shunned and forgotten, to be condemned to death. To carry one's cross, was the end of life. Or it used to be. Jesus changed all that. His love for us, turned the world upside down. He took captivity captive. He emptied hell. He put Satan to flight. Jesus said, I love you enough to die for you and my death means that you will have life abundant and eternal.

Beloved this world is broken, it is enslaved by sin, it is in the grips of war and death and hate. Yet, our Lord, sets free. He breaks the bonds of oppression. He lifts up the lowly. He speaks hope in the midst of the bleakest night. The question for us, is do we love him enough to do the same? Will we seek Jesus above all else? Will we serve the least, the lost, and the left behind with the same love that Jesus has for us? Will we love when hate, fear, and strife are all around us? The answer is no, unless we do it together. Together we can, with God's help, do all this and more. Together we can create spaces of true belonging. Together we can learn to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and mind, and strength, and being – and our neighbor as ourselves. Together we can work for a world where all of God's children know that they are safe and loved and at home. Together.

It is very good to be here. Now eat, drink, find solace and strength in the Eucharist and be on your way—for Lord is on the road ahead of us and we must meet him there.

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