

“First Things First”

September 7, 2025

First Christian Church

Scripture text: Luke 14: 25-33

The year was 1529 and the church was in the midst of the Protestant Reformation. European Churches were breaking away from the Roman Catholic Church and starting their own denominations based on the Bible as opposed to Catholic tradition. But saying you are basing church doctrine on the Bible as opposed to tradition did not solve all the disagreements. One of the big ones was Jesus' presence in communion, and the most famous debate was between Ulrich Zwingli who was the heart and soul of the reform movement, against Martin Luther, the one who began the reformation and leader of what became known as the Lutheran Church. The passage in question was Jesus saying, “This is my body.” Zwingli knew a good metaphor when he read one and knew Jesus was saying the bread represented or stood for His body. Luther, on the other hand, knew what Jesus said is what Jesus meant – it was His body. Zwingli used logic, reason, and quoted other places in Scripture where metaphors are used. Luther just kept repeating, “This is my Body”. Tradition dictates that he carved those words into the table. The debate over how Jesus is present in the Lord's Supper continues to this day, because sometimes it is hard to tell when Jesus is talking straight and should be taken literally, and when He is using a metaphor or a simile, hyperbole or even humor.

Today's reading is not one of those times. It is obvious Jesus is using hyperbole. For those who haven't been in English class for a few years, remember a hyperbole is an exaggerated statement or claim, not meant to be taken literally, but used to add emphasis. “I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse” is hyperbole. I am really hungry, but I couldn't literally eat a horse. When our reading says, “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”, we recognize it as hyperbole – an exaggerated statement to add emphasis. Jesus doesn't literally mean we are supposed to hate our parents, our spouse, our children or even our siblings. Jesus' message is love. The Great commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus says they will know you are my disciples because of the love you have, one to another. Jesus even calls us to love our enemies! Love is the first fruit of the Spirit and hate is not mentioned there. Commandment 4 is honor your parents. Do you really think Jesus is telling us to hate our parents, spouse, children and siblings? No. It is hyperbole - an exaggerated statement or claim, not meant to be taken literally, but used to add emphasis.

Okay Mike, if that is true, what is He trying to say? What is being emphasized? Well, let's set the stage. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem where He will be arrested, beaten, tried, and sentenced to death. Jesus knows this is coming, and He has shared it with His disciples. But the

crowd that is following Jesus doesn't know what is coming. All they know is what they have seen. They have seen Jesus overcome physical challenges –healing the lame, the blind and the deaf. They have witnessed Him overcome spiritual challenges – silencing and casting out evil spirits and demons. They have eaten bread that was multiplied before their eyes. They have seen oppressive religious leaders yield to Jesus. Some have seen Jesus slip unharmed through the grasp of an angry mob that was trying to kill Him. They have even seen Him control the wind and the waves, calming a violent storm at sea. Jesus has been victorious over every physical, mental, and spiritual challenge that human, demon, and nature could throw at Him. The crowd that is following Jesus believes they are part of a victory parade. They have seen what Jesus can do, and there is nothing on earth that can stop Him. They are ready to ride Jesus to victory.

Jesus senses their intent and stops everything to set things straight. This is not a victory parade, a joy ride or a coattail opportunity. They are seeing the upside of following Jesus, but are failing to recognize the cost. Jesus says to follow me is an all-in proposition. Being a fan is not good enough. Being a weekend warrior is not good enough. Having being a Jesus follower on the same priority level as being a parent, a spouse, a child or even a sibling is not good enough. I am not a Greek language scholar, but from what I understand, one of the meanings of the word translated “hate” is “turn away from” or “detach from”. Which means when Jesus says to “hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself,” He is saying we need to “turn away from” being defined by our family relations, “detach ourselves from” even maintaining life itself as our focus, our number one priority. Even more so than now, you got your basic identity from your family, but Jesus says no more. Jesus says turn away from your family, detach from them, get your identity from following me. If your family came from money or poverty, if they were law abiders or thieves, if they raised you to be an athlete, a musician, an artist or a warrior; that takes a backseat when Jesus says love God with your heart, soul, mind and strength. If you were raised with proper manners, street smarts, racism or free love; they all submit to loving your neighbor as yourself. Whether you were spoiled, abused, neglected or empowered; if you want to follow Jesus, you leave it behind. You can't just add a little Jesus to who you already are and be good. Jesus wants to make it clear: you turn away from, you detach from all those as your source of identity and proper behavior, and find who you are in Jesus – period. Following Jesus is your life.

It sounds unrealistic and extreme, but when you think about it, isn't that what you do when you join the military. Boot camp is designed to break you down and build you back like they want you. When you join, you give up loyalty to everything but the military. You go where they say to go, dress like they say to dress, talk like they say to talk, and cut your hair like they want you to cut your hair. You do what they say, how they say, when they say. They decide if you make it home for Christmas or not. It doesn't matter what you or your momma wants. They decide. The same thing happens when you want to really excel at a sport or in band. You give

up your time and money. Whether at practice or not, you do what the coach/director says. You dress like others doing the same thing and learn their special language. You know the practice schedule and what is expected before you sign-up, and you choose to give it all to them. You can complain and say it is too much, but they will simply reply, “This is what it takes to make it to the next level.” That is what Jesus is helping the people think about here. He says, “this is not a free ride. Know that ahead of time. It demands your highest allegiance.” Being a Jesus follower is not something that will happen while you are on autopilot, just going with the flow. Nor is it something that comes naturally, at least not at first. It is an intentional handing over of yourself.

But the payoff! We are not talking about just being a part of a winning team. We are not talking about possible scholarships or even going pro. We are not talking about getting to play with cool toys, having your room and board paid for, traveling the world, having your career training paid for, and defending your country. Volleyball and the military make you give up money, family and even life itself for those things. Jesus says make Me first priority and the payoff is eternal life – abundant, meaningful life here on earth, and eternal life with God forever after. And it is even more than that. It is having life in order. When we get life out of order and put things that are supposed to be subordinate and make them primary, things go sideways. Whenever we take a good gift from God like power or sex or money or family or tradition, and we lift it up to being primary, it corrupts – it messes up those good things. Think about people in your life who don’t have it together. We think of them as irresponsible with money, or addicts, or lost or self-absorbed, or clueless; but they are just people who have put something that is supposed to subordinate and made it primary in their life. They are enslaved because priorities are out of order.

Jesus is calling us to put things in order. I think I have told you this story before, but it is worthy repeating. Adam Hamilton, the guy who wrote the congregational study we did last year called “The Walk”, was talking with his soon to be son-in-law. And he said something like, “I know you are expecting me to say something like ‘love my daughter more than anything else,’ but I am not. I need you to love Jesus more than my daughter.” He went on to say that because he strives more than anything else to love like Jesus loves, to speak like Jesus speaks, to make important what is important to Jesus; he is better. He says, “I am a better husband, because I love Jesus first. I am a better father, because I love Jesus first. I am a better son and a better brother, because I love Jesus first. I am a better employee, a better employer, a better boss because I love Jesus first.”

When Jesus says, “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”, it is not only hyperbole – an exaggerated statement or claim, not meant to be taken literally, but used to add emphasis; it is also irony. Because a person who loves Jesus first is incapable of beating,

neglecting, or hating their wife. A person who makes following Jesus their number one priority, can't take their husband for granted or negate his value. A person who follows Jesus' way of loving others cannot do anything but lovingly shape and empower their children in His image. Hate is not an option for a Jesus follower. If you are loving like Jesus calls us to love, you cannot be hateful in your speech, your humor, or your social media. Because you are a Jesus follower, saved not by merit but by grace, you cannot be greedy, or racist or judgmental. If your identity come from Jesus, you can't claim your gender or hair color or nationality or backstory gives you the right to act in any way other than in love.

Jesus uses hyperbole and even irony, not to advocate hostility toward family, but to promote a steadfast refusal to allow something less valuable to displace something more valuable. And there is nothing more valuable than eternal life.

Mike Van Heyningen