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**C: 13th Sunday after Pentecost / Lectionary 23/ Proper 18
Luke 14:25-33**

**4 September 2022
Salem, Bridgeport**

“Wholeness of Heart”

“If anyone does not hate his father or mother or sister or brother, that person cannot be my disciple.”

This is one of those times when you are sure somebody
must have heard it wrong or remembered it wrong or recorded it wrong!
After all, Jesus told us we were to love everyone, right? Including our enemies!
So how can it be that in one place Jesus is telling us to love our enemies
and here he is telling us to hate our family!

We read or hear this and we think there’s something wrong here.
And yet critical scholarship reminds us that the hardest parts of the Bible are most likely the truest.
Because if it wasn’t true, if Jesus had not said this, then why would anybody have included it?!
No, if it’s in here, Jesus must have said it.
But what are we to do with it?

Well, first of all, let’s remember that we human beings tend to see things in binary terms –
good and evil, light and dark, love and hate.

But spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle counsels
that there is actually no objective positive and negative,
but only subjective judgments that we place on things.

We may judge an experience to be bad at the time.

But decades later we may look back and see that that “bad“ experience
was actually the best thing that ever happened to us.

Sometimes what seems bad is actually good. And sometimes what seems like hate can actually be love.

Take God, for instance. We believe that God is love, correct?

In fact we say that God is perfect love and God loves everything in God’s creation.

And yet, God sent his own son to suffer, to be crucified, to die, and to be buried!

Does that look like love?

It certainly didn’t at the time.

It certainly didn’t look like love to the disciples.

When Jesus said that he had to go to Jerusalem where he would suffer and die,
the disciples said, “No! You can’t do that! That’s not being loving!

If you love us, you will stay here and fight for us,

and bring the kingdom of God to earth, and end the Roman occupation of our country.

If you love us you will make our lives better, and safer, and more comfortable.

If you love us, you will do the things that bring us happiness and peace and joy.

But if you die, not only will you not bring those things to us,

but you will put our lives and the lives of our families at risk.

Because if they kill you, then they will come after us to kills us.

If you love us you would never do that.

And to that kind of response, Jesus commands, “Get behind me, Satan!”

And of course, because Jesus was killed, he did put the lives of his disciples at risk.

All of the disciples suffered and experienced torture and imprisonment.

Stephen was the first follower to be put to death.

Eventually 11 of the 12 disciples were executed.

The apostle Paul enjoyed all manner of suffering and hardship & eventually he, too, was executed.

And yet, all of these martyrs believed that God loved them.

To the outside world it might have appeared as if God hated them,

but disciples knew that God loved them despite what God called them to do.

You see, the disciples understood that it wasn't all about them.
They understood that Jesus didn't come just for them and Jesus didn't come just for Israel.
Jesus came for the entire world – and not for the world's people then, but for the world's people forevermore.
Jesus came for you and for me.
And the disciples gave their lives for us. And countless other Christians gave their lives for us.

It reminds me of “The Insanity of God”,
the documentary that we watched last fall at one of our Sunday Night Alive events.
It was about people in other parts of the world where it is illegal to be a Christian,
and not only illegal but dangerous, and not only dangerous but life-threatening.
There were stories of people who have not only given up their own lives
but who have put the lives of their spouses and their children and their parents
and their extended families and friends at risk in order to follow God.
It is so hard for us to relate to that in this country in this century.
You and I are afraid to talk about inviting Jesus into our lives
in a public place here in this country that claims religious freedom
merely because we are afraid of what people might think of us.
You and I are part of a culture that has unwritten rules
about what we are allowed to say about our faith and what we are not
and there is a silent but firm pressure that silences our witness
when the only cost is a loss of social capital among our fellow church members, family and friends.
While on the other side of the world people are being executed for witnessing for Jesus.

What the text means, I think, is not that we should set out to hate anyone.
What it means is that we must love God above all others.
What is the greatest commandment? You should love the Lord your God
with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind at with all your strength .
And Jesus said that the second commandment is like –
that you should love your neighbor as yourself but loving your neighbor means wanting them
to love God with all their heart and soul and mind strength also.

If God calls you to give up your life, it doesn't mean that God doesn't love you.
It just means that you are part of a bigger picture, part of a longer story.
It's not about deciding to love God and deciding to hate everyone else.
It's about loving God so much and trusting God so much that we understand that when we follow God
we will necessarily be loving our neighbor, no matter what happens to that neighbor.
Most of the time in our lives in this time and place
God will be calling us to love our neighbors in ways that look like love.
God will be calling us to tell people about how much God loves them.
God will be calling us to pray with them and invite them to worship & to study God's Word together.
God will be calling us to make sure they have enough food and clothing and a roof over their heads,
that they're getting a proper education, that they have proper healthcare.
But that's where things may start to look different from people's narrow conception of love
where it is wrapped in niceness and comfort and stability,
But that's only the illusion of love, because true love goes beyond the niceness and the comfort and stability
to speak truth, and to work for justice, and to topple systems of oppression.
Jesus wasn't killed because he was a nice, amiable, loving guy;
Jesus was killed because he loved the world enough
to speak the truth, to call out evil, and to challenge every system of injustice.
And Jesus did those things, not because they were easy and not because they would make his followers or
or the religious authorities or the governmental leaders feel loved.
Jesus did it because he loved and trusted God enough to act in ways
that may have made his family and followers and friends feel unloved
as he refused to put their needs and wants and desires before God's.

Much of the time God will call us to do things that look like love,
but sometimes God will call us to love in ways that don't look or feel like love.
In the covenant we made when we affirmed our baptism, we promised:
to live among God's faithful people, to hear the word of God and share in the Lord's Supper,
to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,
to serve all people following the example of Jesus, and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.
Some of us do some of those things some of the time – the things we do that look like love:
we may live among God's faithful people in this community called Salem
we may hear the Word and receive the Sacrament at worship,
we serve some people with deeds of compassion.
But there are things in those promises that push us to do things that may not look like love.
We have promised to share the good news of God in Christ through our words,
through our verbal witness, through our personal testimony,
which some outside and inside the church may find offensive.
We serve SOME people, but not ALL people & often we do it from a place of power & privilege
instead of following the example of Jesus
& doing it from a place of humility & the willingness to build relationships of equality.
& when it comes to striving for justice? Well, we in the White church have certainly not done much of that.
And yet, we have made those promises to God.
In the end, it comes down to that first and greatest command –
that we love God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength.
Can we do that perfectly? Not by a long shot – for we are in bondage to sin and we cannot free ourselves.
Yet grace comes to us anew each day
as God calls us to get up and invites us once again into deeper relationship with him.
And as we grow in that relationship,
as we spend more time in worshipping and praying and studying God's Word,
as we spend more time witnessing to what God is doing in our lives,
and testifying to how powerful and loving and great God is,
as we live out God's call to service, not in the ways we decide but in the way we discern God is calling us,
as we grow in our commitment to striving for peace and justice,
what we will find is that the things that may look to others like hate or suffering or God's not caring,
are actually just part of the journey of faith and hope accompanied by God's love.
Jesus did not get to the resurrection without the crucifixion, & we can't get to life without going through death.
Jesus tells us that "those who seek to save their lives will lose them,
but those who lose their lives for his sake will find them."
"Losing our lives" may mean losing the equilibrium in a family that doesn't want to hear about our faith,
or it may mean losing our reputation as the right kind of Christian-the kind who doesn't talk about their faith,
or it may mean losing a job, or a friendship, or a significant love interest,
or it may mean risking our lives to join a protest for Black Lives Matter,
But what anyone who has loosed their life for Jesus knows, is that it is always worth it, no matter what the cost.
Those people on the other side of the world who are willing to die for their sake of Jesus Christ,
the people who are willing to put their children's or their spouse's lives at risk
do so not because they're looking at the suffering or dying,
but because are following God's call along the path of Jesus as they are empowered by the Spirit.
Every one of Jesus' disciples then and now who seek to follow him must follow in his Way,
which is with whole-hearted love of God, without regard for anyone or anything else.
Others may feel like we hate them or don't care about them,
and at times, they may convince us that we really don't care.
But when we follow Jesus, we follow the Way, the Truth and the Life – and no matter how it may appear,
that way is the way of peace & justice, the way of faith & hope, & the way of love & joy
not only for us, but for all the world. Amen