

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 18 (C) ~ 7 September 2025
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda
Deuteronomy 30:15-20
Psalm 1
Luke 14:25-33

Some Assembly Required

Let us pray:

*You voice the worlds into being,
You voice the church into obedience,
You voice us, now and then, into newness,
You speak and call into existence that which does not exist.*

*You speak and address us,
and make all things new...
You speak and we are,
You listen and we are voiced,
always again on our way rejoicing, Amen.*

I promised I'd ask again.

In my sermon last Sunday, I posed a question. Does anyone remember what it was?

[How did you help build the Kingdom of God this past week?]

So... How *did* you help build the Kingdom of God this past week?

Would anyone be willing to share?

This morning, we receive additional instruction in the do-it-yourself “Kingdom of God building kit.” But before we look at those directions, I wonder:

Have you ever purchased anything that came with those three dreaded words printed on the box:

Some assembly required?

Parents everywhere know the despair that simple statement can engender. In my experience, “some assembly” usually involves trying to follow a series of hieroglyphic illustrations indicating to insert Tab A in Slot Q...with nothing labeled, of course. And then, inevitably, there are the parts left over at the end.

That bit always worries me.

I’ll just say, for parents of small children, who dream of outgrowing this stage at some point, it doesn’t get easier when they go off to college. If only you could have seen Randy and me trying to put together Andrew’s new “dresser” a couple of weeks ago: Let’s just say that it involved a YouTube video, several tools that we did not have, and more than a little salty language.

Some assembly required, my foot.

Sometimes it feels as though Jesus’ directions for building the Kingdom of God are a bit like that. Sometimes it’s not immediately clear how they fit together – or how they fit with what we know of Jesus already.

This morning He 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.

This is not a great recruitment campaign slogan.

And certainly not the favorite text of preachers.

Does this sound like the same person who said,

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...”
(Matthew 5:44)

or

“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them...”
(Luke 18:16)

or

“I desire mercy, not sacrifice...”
(Matthew 9:13)?

If Jesus’ words this morning seem shocking to you, it is little wonder: We do not expect to hear talk of hate from the Prince of Peace. You and I know far too well the tragic consequences of hate. Language about hate makes us sit up and pay attention. Our antennae are tuned, and we are right to be concerned. Why would Jesus say such divisive and painful things? No doubt the people traveling with Jesus are asking the same question – which is exactly what He wants.

We can assume that the crowds closing in around Jesus are most likely following Him because of what they think He will do for them: They are hungry, and He will feed them; they are hurting or ill, and He will heal them; they are filled with shame, and He will set them free. Whatever the reason they are with Him, there are a lot of them, and Jesus needs to thin the herd—He needs to separate the groupies and hangers-on from the true disciples as He turns toward Jerusalem and the cross.

But *hate*?

It's time to look at the original language here. The Greek word Luke uses — *miséo* — can, in fact, be translated “hate.” Think “misanthrope,” in English. But remember that context is important: It was common in Ancient Near Eastern cultures to employ exaggerated, or hyperbolic, language for rhetorical effect.¹ Such language tended to be binary, either/or, to make a point. There was no in-between, no nuance. If something was not black, it must be white, not gray; if it was not loved, it must be hated, not merely “loved a little less.” You get the idea. The language was dramatic, but it was also effective.

So when Jesus tells us to hate father and mother, wife and children, etc., it's pretty clear that He does not mean that we should despise our closet family members. As the Psalmist writes, it is *God* who “sets the lonely in families” (Psalm 68), and many of us would say that we have experienced the love of God through our committed relationships.

What Jesus *is* saying is that we must not mistake the means for the end.

Relationships—with family, friends, colleagues—may point us to God, but they are not a substitute for God. So often we turn to a spouse, or a child, or another loved one (perhaps even a pet), looking for the other to make us happy, to satisfy some deep need within us: a need to be validated, or challenged, or entertained, or supported, or adored. Or not to be alone. We do this with other things, too, like work, or causes, or fitness, or food, or substances, or possessions. We do this with social media, and with appearance and status and praise. We certainly do this with money. And believe it or not, sometimes we even do it with the Church, focusing so much on Church growth and “success” that we lose sight of God's will in the process.

Anything—no matter how good or noble—that distracts us, that detracts from our focus on God, can be an idol.

This is why Jesus adds this challenging Kingdom-building instruction:

¹ <http://www.tektonics.org/gk/hyperbole.php>

None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Is He really saying to get rid of everything we own? (I know, I know: It's tempting!)

Once again, we need to look at the Greek: *Hupárchonta*, which gets translated here as “possessions,” comes from a root that means “being,” or “existing.”² This suggests that, when Jesus talks about giving up our *hupárchonta*, He's talking about something more fundamental – and nearer and dearer to our hearts – than just our “stuff.” He's talking about our constructed “self,” our image, the mask we wear – the person we want others to see as we navigate this complicated and messy world.

Jesus invites us to take off the mask, to surrender our whole Selves to God's purposes and vision for us.

I wonder if you hear echoes of the language of addiction and Twelve-Step programs here? I certainly do. Because whenever we put someone or something in place of God who is not God, sooner or later we run into trouble. People disappoint us, or leave us, or die. Jobs end. Possessions can disappear in the blink of an eye. And then... What's left? Where, then, do we find our purpose and meaning and hope?

Augustine of Hippo, who eventually became one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known, was rather “worldly” and rebellious in his youth. You might say that he was “looking for love in all the wrong places,” to quote an old song. A notorious womanizer and what today we would call partier, Augustine ran away from God for years. His mother wanted desperately for him to become a Christian, but he resisted—until at last he had a profound vision of God that he could not ignore. He began to understand God as his Source and Savior and Sustainer until he was unable to run away anymore, and eventually Augustine became a Christian. He later reflected on his conversion in what is probably the

² <https://biblehub.com/greek/5224.htm>

most famous sentence from his *Confessions*: “You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.”³

Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. And only God—not the idols we set up for ourselves in place of God.

So what does it look like to “rest in God”? Before I say another word, I want to acknowledge that this is easier said than done, and I would be a hypocrite if I led anyone to believe that I have this mastered. I am a “work in progress,” as we all are. Resting in God is a process, a discipline, not a destination, and it does not happen overnight. And despite the way it sounds, it is not a passive endeavor: it requires an active choice, regularly (Jesus says daily) to seek God and nurture our relationship with God above all else. Resting in God is also not linear: it’s possible to feel deeply connected to our Source and Savior and Sustainer one day and more distanced the next. That’s okay; the feeling comes back, if we are intentional.

The most obvious way to begin to rest in God is through prayer – which might be done privately or in a small group or in our corporate worship every Sunday. And by prayer I don’t just mean asking for what we want, but also—perhaps more importantly—listening in silence for what *God* wants. Resting in God might mean studying God’s Word, as well as the history of the Church—and, while we’re at it, of other faith traditions. What can we learn from our Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or Sikh brothers and sisters? We also might rest in God on retreat, or in spiritual direction. We might rest in God through sabbath and self-care and play. We might rest in God through service and stewardship, by speaking out against injustice, and by giving thanks in all things, to quote St. Paul. And yes, we might even rest in God with our family.

These are but a few more building blocks for the Kingdom of God here on earth. Try them out this week. But I caution you: Some assembly is required.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, *Amen*.

³ Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.