

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (9/8), 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Some very considerable number of years ago, I spent time riding snowmobiles around the woods of Vermont. Noisy though they were...and, as the years pass, I am less certain I would find all that racket much fun...they did have the ability to take a person somewhere he couldn't otherwise go.

Miles and miles of travel through the pristine forests. Stopping for a time and being enveloped in silence. Finding deserted cabins and pondering who might once have inhabited them. These, and many other delights, were part of this endeavor.

It is the final of them that I would like to explore a bit, for I remember one day, a crystal clear and cold Winter afternoon, on which I was traveling through an area with which I wasn't familiar. I happened to come upon a cabin. It was clearly deserted...and had been for some considerable time. The roof was beginning to sag...some of the chimney had collapsed...the windows were broken...and little remained of the front porch. I stopped my snowmobile and sat for a few moments simply looking at the building...looking and pondering who might once have been here...what life might have existed within these walls.

I went inside. Table and chairs...a double bed...dishes...glasses...all pieces of life, bespeaking a vitality...that was no longer present.

All that was present was the empty shell of life. Whatever laughter...joy...and fulfillment might once have existed here was gone...utterly...replaced by dust, spider webs, silence, and decay.

Each of us has the possibility of being like that cabin...either in its vital state...filled with life and strength...or in the state in which I found it...empty, dead, and failing in upon itself for want of any life to sustain it.

Each of us has the possibility of having our relationships with those closest to us being like that cabin...sustaining, nourishing, protecting...or empty, dead, and falling in.

It was still a cabin...much the same as it had always been...but the life had gone out of it.

We are still ourselves...our relationships are still relationships...much can look the same as it always has...but the life can have gone out of us or them.

I think this is much of that at which Jesus is driving in this somewhat difficult passage from Luke's Gospel.

Does he really want us to hate those closest to us? Does he really want us to hate ourselves?

I suggest that is highly doubtful. Everything this man ever did...every person with whom he came in contact. . bespoke his utter commitment to seeking to bring human journeyers to the fullness of their beings...to the most complete understanding possible of themselves and their gifts and their life on this earth...to glimpses of that which is holy and sustaining and eternal and

resides just below the surface of so very much that we take to be simply the ordinary, day-to-day stuff of life.

What he is driving at...his point, as it were...is that, if we are to come to him, we simply must examine our own lives and the relationships within them and, under a harsh and unforgiving microscope, see what is really there.

Have we, and they, become empty husks...still bearing some resemblance to the living, breathing, nourishing reality that once was there...but now lifeless and draining and still?

If so, then he tells his followers that they have a cross they must bear. And this cross is the undertaking of the rebuilding...the revitalization...of those empty husks...and it is a difficult and expensive proposition.

It will demand endless effort...sacrifice...struggle. It will involve the forgiving of hurts and wrongs done of which the doer may well be entirely unaware...the forgiving of oneself for actions taken that one had convinced oneself were right but which, in fact, were wrong.

Jesus's call to this disturbing "hating" is not, I am convinced, based upon the entirety of his life, a hating of those parts of us and our relationship which are alive and sustaining...but those that are empty and destructive.

So very much that our Lord brought into this life had to do with the perspective from which we view this life...with seeing below the surface to the reality that resides there.

The cabin was a cabin...but the life was gone from it. We can still be us...but the life can have gone out of us. A relationship can still be a relationship...but the life can have gone out of it.

And where this lifelessness appears...we are to hate it...to bring all our will and being and planning to bear. No different from building a huge tower, we are to contemplate just what it will take to undertake such bringing to life again...and we should not underestimate it...or we will come up short.

We need Christ with us...as part of us...in order to reach our goal...and if we are to come to Christ, he asks our very selves...our souls and bodies. No different from the cross...which asked everything of him...but, in return, gave back everything...and more.

I wish I knew what has happened to that cabin. It would be lovely to imagine it restored to life and vitality. More likely, it has fallen completely into decay, for it was utterly isolated and alone, and there was no one to make the sacrifices necessary to restore it.

We do not need to be isolated and alone...unless we will it. And, as long as we, with one another...and with Christ's presence through us...will ourselves to make the sacrifices necessary to bring new life...Christ promises that life can be ours...that resurrection can be realized.

There is great cost in making such a commitment...there is even greater cost in failing to do so.