

## The Point of No Return

September 4, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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*Texts: Luke 14: 25-33*

**25** Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them, **26** "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. **27** Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. **28** For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? **29** Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, **30** saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' **31** Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? **32** If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. **33** So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Last weekend, Nancy and I were able to enjoy a final summer getaway. We drove to the family farm her grandfather built in the Finger Lakes region of Upstate New York. It was lovely. And just for kicks, we spent one night - our anniversary - in Niagara Falls, just an extra two hours' drive north. Romantic and corny? Yes, we know, but I had never been before and the falls themselves were absolutely stunning, as were the utterly egregious tourist attractions built up all around them. The expression that came to mind capturing the convergence of American commercialism at its worst and God's creation at its best was: Shock and Awe! We leaned it into it all. We hit both sides of the falls, Canadian and American and had cocktails at fifteenth-floor hotel bars with spectacular views right into the Horseshoe. We took a boat ride donning our blue "Maid of the Mist" ponchos and got soaked by the hurricane-force winds and waters at the base of the cataract. We learned stories of those who had survived and perished in attempts to ride the sheer power of 600,000 gallons of water per second coursing over and down the 188-foot cliffs. And, at one point, we found ourselves on a State park trolley, being carted along the river well above the falls. The driver pointed out stretches of class 6, and so "unsurvivable" rapids there and also mentioned an invisible marker, the symbolism of which has stayed with me. He said, looking out at the upper Niagara River, "and here we are passing the "point of no return!" What he meant, of course, was that no human, animal, boat, or machine could, after that point in the river, amass the energy required to resist the surging force and flow of all that water volume and gravity! Past that point, it was one way only, and that way was down!

Well, here we are, some of us at least, if we are lucky, still free-floating in these waning days of summer, yet many are surely feeling the strong pull of what lies just ahead. We can kick and paddle our upstream resistance, but let's face it, Labor Day is that veritable point of no return on many of our calendars, at least in these parts. Can you sense the surging draw of that inevitable cascade of back to school, back to work, back to church meetings, tasks, and events? Or the rising volume of traffic in the streets, stores and coffee shops? There can be a rush to it all, to be sure, a delightful and effervescent energy, a refreshing mist of reconnection, yet it can also be hard to stay calm, carry on and keep our head above the water. As I've been saying all week, September is here, ready or not...

In our text for today, Jesus is naming some powerful and unrelenting forces of his own and invites us to be as clear about what we are holding onto and what we are letting go of as we seek to follow him down whatever proverbial rivers of our faith journeys. I also can't help but wonder if there may be a sort of "point of no return" that he had in mind when considering the level of commitment, he is positing here. Allow me to explain and see if this resonates at all for you.

First, he begins by echoing his own words from two chapters before. I preached on them three weeks ago. At that point, Jesus brought a strong message in Luke 12. He said: 'I've come to set father against son, mother against daughter,' and so on. And here we find a similar message: "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" Ouch! This is tough stuff, and no doubt why he needs to repeat himself. Whoever doesn't hate their loved ones can't be my disciples? Barbara Brown Taylor once open a sermon on this text by saying: "If any of you came here this morning believing that you were disciples of Jesus Christ, then I guess you know better now." Fair point! She was assuming, at least at first, that Jesus meant this literally, that we literally need to cut off our relationships with others, and go "all in," hardcore monk style, on our commitments to discipleship. Thankfully, other scholars have suggested Jesus is engaged here in a sort of "provocative, prophetic hyperbole." Eugene Peterson's translation of the Bible, the Message, follows this and offers a decidedly softer, more nuanced alternative of vs 26: "Anyone who refuses to let go of their father, mother, spouse, children, can't be my disciples!"

Anyone who refuses to let go. That's a little mellower, right? It's still pretty confounding stuff and still a high bar for discipleship but it could be that Jesus is just teaching here...warning us in no uncertain terms against having unhealthy attachments in our relationships. He could just be advising us here to find a deeper sense of freedom to be who we are most called to be when we don't overvalue others or ourselves, when we don't too quickly give ourselves over to their. It's also likely a caution against unwittingly create idols of other people, including and most especially our nearest and dearest. Peterson brings it all home again with an equally helpful alt translation of the last line of our passage. Rather than the stark New Revised Standard Version which says "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions," instead Peterson powerfully puts in these more contemporary terms, translating verse 33 as: "Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple."

And hopefully, now you can see what I mean by those powerful and unrelenting forces that Jesus names - those often irresistible tugs at our hearts, lives and schedules. They can often carry enormous volumes of meaning and high levels of gravity, and if we aren't careful, they can have us gasping for air before we know it! My guess is that most of us would readily admit that we are well beyond the point of no return in terms of being willing to do anything for our own children, say, or other loved ones, but here Jesus would seemingly want us to check even those instincts and wonder and at least ask the question: just what are these forces greater than you are that are pulling and tugging at you, always churning the waters of our emotional and spiritual and practical lives? Are we giving those people and plans too much power? What of them are truly awe-worthy and what of them are adding or to easily rolling with the rising currents of our dominant cultural schlock? Do we need to let go or break out of the hold they have on us? Do we need to make space for our lives to be drawn in a new direction?

Yes, there's an adjustment to our full fall schedules, yes, there's a lot more volume and gravity and yes, what you are already doing is really important- your learning, your leading, your advocacy, your spending all your free time caring for loved ones, whether kids or spouses or elders, or even your spending all your time at doctors appts caring for yourself. I'm hoping by now we can all picture our

unique versions of the flow of these forces that are seemingly beyond our control and conjure that visceral sense of sometimes feeling swept away by it all.

If you can't relate right now at an existential level, we can also put it in broader terms. Some are saying we've reached and even passed the point of no return in terms of American democracy as we've known it, and that we are well past being able to recover or return from our climate crisis. At the very least, our nation and world are in the midst of unprecedented life-threatening rapids. There's an ominous swirling sense out there and in here that our civic and collective life is swirling in some seemingly unstoppable whirlpool cycle of power grubbing greed, that we are being drawn down by increasingly treacherous currents of delusion and denial, and that our most vaunted institutions - our electoral processes, our Supreme court, for example - are at a perilous brink.

And what does Jesus say to us as individuals and as a community - as we strive to hold on to an endless summer, as we yearn for simpler times, as we may be inclined to circle the wagons, to take what we think is ours, to cling to our loved one and take our families not just to visit Canada but to move there? He says: Let go! Let go of whatever you are holding most dear! Let go of whatever persons, plans, possessions you think you just cannot live without! At least watch out if you find yourself refusing to let go of these things! Instead, he offers...trust me, come to me, and set yourself in the deeper rivers and currents of life that is really life that I will show. Let go and let God and me carry you! It may feel like a terrifying and painful and unsurvivable plunge down Niagara Falls at first, but trust, let your life flow my way, and it will be like a baptism into a whole new life. Follow me and I will teach you how to trust that God's love is all you need. When we learn that together you will know a freedom and joy and generosity of life and purpose such that you'll never even want to go back!

I wonder if any of the early disciples or if there have been Christians throughout the years, maybe someone you know or can conjure, a historic figure, a grandmother or grandfather maybe, who have so learned to let go...who have passed a different point of no return in their faith journeys, where they have so learned to trust God, so given themselves to the magnetic and gravitational force of that love that they have through their lives modelled a process of stripping themselves down of all possessions and possessive attitudes. Maybe it's the gifts that some have of being fully present, fully in the moment, of being able to say even to their most beloved person, plan or possession, it's ok...I'm good, better with you for sure, but I won't refuse to let you go when the time comes, heck I won't myself refuse to go when the time comes because I know I'm carried by that deeper river where God's love is the only truly essential thing!

Talk about a reframe! Instead of being swept up in a crushing of demands and to dos in this new season, or in a cascading sense of fear about the state of our world, imagine instead letting our individual and collective lives be carried, captivated and drawn by the greatest power and gravitational pull of God's love. Imagine our faith journey's bringing us to a point of no return, where we are all in - all in our giving, and letting go, all in our sharing and relinquishing. Not clinging, not wanting, not longing, not efforting to do or be anything for anyone. It would be as powerful, as awesome, as refreshing, and as unending as the Niagara Falls themselves! Sometime this week, go and stand by a river if you can, even for a just a few - could be the Charles or the Mystic or a little stream, and imagine not refusing to let go of whatever people, plans or possessions you hold most dear. And imagine trusting that deeper river of God's life and love to carry you through whatever rapids, calm waters and falls that may lie ahead.

Allow me to wrap this up by sharing a poem I've shared with many of you many times before. If Jesus can repeat himself over the course of two chapters, I trust he won't mind if I do over the course of

several years of preaching. The poem is called the Avowal and it's by Denise Levertov. Close your eyes if you'd like and set yourself on that river heading into the fall, come what may... Here goes...

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them;  
so, would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

One more time.

As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them;  
so, would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.

May it be so for all of us. Amen!

