

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 23C, Sept 4, 2016
Luke 14:25-33**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

A few weeks ago, on the evening of August 20, CBC preempted their live Olympics coverage to broadcast, uninterrupted by commercials, what is expected to be the the Tragically Hip's final concert, because of the lead singer, Gord Downie's, diagnosis of terminal brain cancer. 11.7 million Canadians - roughly one-third of our population - watched, listened to or streamed it live. For perspective, the top entertainment show of 2015 was the Academy Awards at 5.5 million and the top 2015 sports broadcast was the Super Bowl at 8.3 million. Far surpassing either of those American broadcasts, Canada basically shut down that night, with over 11 million people remembering, celebrating, and mourning the expected end of a favourite Canadian band.

During a CBC interview in the lead-up to the event, a superfan was asked about how he felt about attending this concert and answered: "This is church for me, and this is the last time I get to go." It kinda makes you wonder what "church" means to this Tragically Hip super fan? And why it is that he finds church at a Hip concert but not at... well... church?

The Hip concert came as we were nearing the end of the latest Olympiad, and noticing what happens in the community with such events may help point to an explanation. There is nothing like being part of a group coming together around a common belief, a common cause, or a common interest. There is nothing like being part of something bigger than ourselves. Whether it's donating money to help people effected by tragedy like the Fort McMurray fires; or expressing grief and outrage following a tragedy like any of the many terrorist attacks around the world; or cheering for athletes whose names we learn only every 4 years; or tuning in to the tragic final concert of a favourite Canadian band ... people yearn to be part of something bigger, something that transcends themselves, in the company of others who feel and think similarly. People yearn for shared passion, common cause, and collective belief... In a word, people yearn for church and look for it whenever and wherever they can. So why don't so many people find church at church?

Today Jesus addresses a large crowd gathered around him in the middle of the Gospel according to Luke: "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." Yikes! It's not exactly the warm and loving message we have come to expect from Jesus! It's not exactly a feel-good message we might like to hear to wrap-up summer! I think we're particularly shocked about Jesus' use of the word "hate." We associate Jesus with love, the antithesis of hate, and so it can be a struggle to hear past the word and try to understand, to unpack, what Jesus might be on about. It might help to realize that Jesus is using hyperbole to highlight a contrast and that the word translated as "hate" doesn't mean anger or hostility but rather, as one commentator describes, it "indicates that if there is a conflict, one's response to the demands of discipleship

must take precedence, over even the most sacred of human relationships.” (NIB, 292) In other words, Jesus is expressing the seriousness of commitment of being a disciple.

Jesus goes on: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” The repetition is apparent... Jesus begins with “whoever” and ends with “cannot be my disciple.” Perhaps Jesus is seeking to thin out the large crowd a little... maybe it feels like the journey is becoming frivolous, with people who have come along not having heard much of Jesus’ teaching. Maybe travelling with Jesus had just become the latest, cool thing to do. And so Jesus gives the crowd a reality-check, setting out conditions for discipleship. The call to discipleship must take precedence over family relationships, even life itself... and the call to discipleship will involve, at some point, a measure of suffering or struggle. Carrying a cross is not about chronic illness, or a difficult life circumstance. Carrying a cross is about “what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ.” (NIB, 293) Cross-bearing is about deliberate sacrifice. Jesus is simply, if harshly, reminding the crowd what becoming a disciple of Jesus requires.

Jesus continues with 2 short parables: one about a builder considering constructing a tower; and one about a king considering making war with his neighbour. Both stories are about preparation, planning and sober thought about how realistic the plan is... the implied questions are: Is the building project likely to be completed? Is the chance of success likely or should another approach be considered? Jesus began the stories: “For which of you...” And as the brief stories are laid out, the implied answer is: “well, nobody! Obviously!” There is a warning in the stories about impulsiveness or foolishness... Jesus’ stories point instead to clear thinking and rational contemplation. I might even say prayer... prayer in action and prayer in planning and cogent thinking ahead. Jesus is advocating for the opposite of blind faith or emotional decision-making. This is no head-in-the-clouds spirituality. As uncomfortable as it may be, today Jesus tells the crowd something difficult but clear-headed about the realities of discipleship... what to expect as a disciple.

And, unfortunately, Jesus isn’t finished yet. If turning away from our closest family relationships and an expectation of suffering aren’t enough as conditions for discipleship, Jesus concludes with a third and final condition: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Jesus calls us to give up everything. It is ridiculous to think that anyone, really, is going to actually fulfill this condition - except, perhaps someone extraordinary like St. Francis of Assisi - but the principle remains that Jesus calls us to give all we have, and all we are. This does not mean we deny or ignore what we have or who we are, but like carrying a cross, this is about conscious, deliberate choice to follow a particular path. It is about putting our commitment to Jesus and Jesus’ way of sacrificial love above all else, including material possessions.

Now that, my friends, is something worth gathering for and singing about... that is something bigger, something that transcends ourselves. Celebrating this commitment to Jesus, and to sacrificial love... celebrating this shared passion, this common cause, this collective belief, together, in the company of others who feel and think similarly... that is church at its best. That is the kind of church that so many people seek. Why have so many people not found church at church? Because, from time to time, we forget who we are, as beloved and blessed children of God, who already know the greatest of love of all. Because, from time to time, we forget that our

call as disciples of Christ is to give all we have and all we are, to bear suffering as a consequence of choosing love, and to place our commitment as disciples above all else, even our most closely held relationships.

This year we are focussing on mission... how we participate in God's dream and God's way already at work here in NW Calgary. It is not about head-in-the-clouds spirituality... it is not about blind faith or emotional decision-making... and it is not about the friendship among us. God's mission is not about "us" at all. It is about understanding ourselves as disciples, together, with all the strength and power of the commitment to which Jesus calls us to today, as the beginning place of living into our part in God's work, here in our community, in 2016 and beyond. Being part of God's mission is about being a part of something bigger than we are, something that expands beyond the boundaries of this gathered community. God's mission is about working and praying together, to bring light and life and love to any and to all in need... even at the risk of encountering trouble, of losing all we have, of suffering because we choose loving sacrifice.

The Five Marks of Mission, developed and accepted throughout the Anglican Communion worldwide, but appropriated by churches beyond our Communion... these Marks provide a framework for understanding and evaluating how we are living God's Mission in concrete ways. The Five Marks can show us where we are at... where we are strong and where we still have work to do. They provide a way of expressing to the community around us who we are as disciples of Jesus. They help us understand what the "more" is that we are about... what our specific mission can be that transcends any one of us. The Five Marks push us to be focussed outward to the world around us as we proclaim good news; as we teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; as we respond to human need with loving service; as we seek transformation towards justice and peace; as we care for creation.

May our shared passion, common cause, and collective belief grow stronger, broader and deeper day by day. May we face into Jesus' conditions for discipleship with humility, trust and determination. May we be the kind of church people seek through our commitment to living into the kingdom of God - God's mission - that Jesus spoke about, more and more, with generosity and grace.