

## **Lessons for Living a Life**

*A sermon preached on Luke 14:25-33 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 8, 2019*

### I.

Just inside the cover page of our *Lessons for Living a Life* worship journals is this poem from the great Wendell Berry:

*You mustn't wish for another life. You mustn't want to be somebody else.*

*What you must do is this:*

*“Rejoice evermore.*

*Pray without ceasing.*

*In everything give thanks.”*

*I am not all the way capable of so much, but those are the right instructions.<sup>1</sup>*

And another I love in a similar vein is from Mary Oliver:

*“Instructions for living a life.*

*Pay attention.*

*Be astonished.*

*Tell about it.”<sup>2</sup>*

It seems our great poets have a way with whittling down the critical directions in life to these simple maxims, right? To these, we could add some of the classic lessons of life from mama or grandmama or kindergarten teachers like, “Clean up after yourselves. Put things back where you found them. Use your gentle hands. Share! If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. Be kind.”

In the wonderful words of poets and grandmas and kindergarten teachers, it seems that life lived well is straightforward, direct, clear. You might even call them uncomplicated. They ring honest and true in a modern,

---

<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, *Hannah Coulter*.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, *Devotions*.

complex world where all of us are just trying to do the best we can with what we have. It's a world where the internet helps us look for 'life hacks' – you know what those are, the shortcuts or tricks that help to improve a task's productivity or efficiency. – and where Instagram would have us to believe that everyone is living their best life right now. It's a world that warms by the day, a world where justice is too often denied, a world where violence is the quick and easy way to never confront one's own pain, It's a world where children are over-scheduled and undernourished and parents just can't keep up, where teenagers are consumed with anxiety and 20-somethings worry if they can afford to get sick, where workers log more hours for less pay and where we all wonder if we have enough money to retire, where seniors grapple with life at a different pace and where the dying fear the end.

Because of all this, it's the kind of world where we just need some simple and straightforward direction like what we had in kindergarten. The "just tell me what I'm supposed to do and I'll do it" kind of world.

Into such a world that God so loved, a world into which Jesus came to save and liberate and release and set free, a world and a way that began for each of us as followers of Christ with the simple instruction to 'follow me', becomes the world like the one I described, one so complex, one where we just need straightforward direction becomes a world where we hear this: *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. Carry your cross, count your costs, give up on all your possessions.*

To that, I say — I’m sorry, what? I mean, what parent of younger children **hasn’t** heard them claim in a fit of anger, “I hate you mommy!” But somehow I don’t think this is the kind of family hate that Jesus was after here.

## II.

Centuries have passed, but we Christians still struggle with these types of instructions from Jesus. Because what he seems to say here is that in a life of discipleship in Christ, **all the things** – all relationships, all priorities, all decisions, all obligations, all successes, all loyalties, all physical possessions – everything comes second to one’s relationship with God and faithful life of bringing about God’s kingdom here on earth.

Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor once began a sermon on this passage from Luke this way: “If any of you came here this morning believing that you were disciples of Jesus Christ, then I guess that you know better now.”<sup>3</sup> Meaning — if we’re being honest, my guess is that most of us – myself included – do **not** want to hear a set of instructions like this!

That quote was rattling around in my head this week as I studied, but it came to a head yesterday morning just before dawn. On Friday, my husband Josh had caught what we assumed to be a nasty stomach bug, the kind that flattened him all day on Friday and canceled our plans. Yesterday morning, I rose early to get ready for a day spent with some of you and our Winston-Salem neighbors at the Bookmarks Festival, only to find Josh in anguish and pain. A quick Googling of his symptoms made it clear that I needed to get him to the hospital immediately. Several quick calls and decisions and movements later, we were on our way to the emergency room, where scans

---

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “Friends of the Disciples,” *Preaching in the New Millennium*.

pointed undeniably to acute appendicitis. In the time we waited for surgery, his pain worsened, his fever spiked, and his whole being seemed to contract in upon itself. It was all I could do to not march into the OR and demand that the surgeons hurry up and fix my husband right this minute!

Thankfully, the medicine kicked in. The surgeons operated. The angry appendix came out. The nurses watched over him with care. And late last night when he fell asleep after the trauma of the day, the anxiety I had been carrying began to break down. I scrolled again through all the texts and calls and messages from friends and family and felt overwhelming gratitude. The room had grown quiet, save for the beeps and clicks and drips and hallway conversation spilling in around the door. And in the shadow of his IV pole, I found myself looking upon my husband with the kind of focused, intense love so deep it nearly split my heart wide open. *Hate my husband, Jesus? And our children? The families we were born into and the ones that have chosen us? Life itself? Forget it. I'll take a hard pass. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, I guess I know better now.*

But as I sat this morning in that uncomfortable bedside lounge chair that every hospital room has and watched the sun begin to break through the inky night sky, I began to wonder again — more generously this time — about Jesus' commandment. I wondered if the kind of love that we experience with a loved one in trauma — the love that erases everything in your mind except for the overwhelming desire for their wellness and peace — if that's the kind of love and devotion Jesus is asking of us. For in a life or death situation, gone are the to do lists in your mind, gone is that house project you really wanted to do or the pair of shoes upon which you've had your eyes. Gone is the

fretting over this work situation or that petty drama. Gone are all those things. In their place is focused, absolute, unquestioned and unconditional love. The kind of love that carries one's cross and counts the costs and gives up the rest for love that matters in the end when nothing else matters. The kind of love, I think, that Jesus asks us to give to him as his disciples.

### III.

You know, as much as I love Jesus, I'm not confident in my daily capacity to count the costs as he so describes. Lord knows I love my family more than I can hardly name, that my friends and village and beloved communities breathe life for me every day, that what I have — however meager or much — become the things that help me feed my family, nurture our home, care for those that need it, and delight in the small things in this life. Too often, I'm likely to be like one of those in the large crowd that heard such a description of discipleship in the way of Jesus, and found themselves stricken to hear such a charge and imagine such a life. Notice that we don't hear later that the crowds was so large. Too often I find I'm like those in the crowd who slowly trickled away as he continued his road to the cross.

But I hope — dear God I hope — that in the moments when it matters most because nothing else matters that I could love Jesus so boldly and follow him so boundlessly. And in all the days in between, I'm going to look to the faithfulness of those first disciples — the ones who did drop their nets and did count their costs and did leave their families and did risk their lives to follow their Lord all the way to that empty tomb. I'm going to lean on the faithful witness of Jesus who sets us free. I'm going to trust in the God who calls us by name. I'm going to look to you as that great cloud of witnesses.

We'll do that for each other. And maybe - just maybe - that helps us take step after step of faithful discipleship. Step after step — this meal for this person who is hungry, this visit, this opportunity to repair, this time to love, this time to serve. And they become like brick after brick to build our strong foundation.

#### IV.

Pastor and author Mark Yaconelli tells a sobering story about a call he once got from a Christian woman. Deeply distressed after talking with her college-age son, the woman told Mark about how her son had decided to leave his studies to join a group of Americans going to Iraq to be with Iraqi civilians during the bombing and occupation. Their goal was twofold — to work in a children's hospital, but to do so as a visible presence of American citizens in an Iraqi space. They hoped this would add extra layers of protection to the lives of the Iraqi civilians, as well as increase awareness about the suffering of those civilians back home.

Hearing all of this, the mother was upset, and told her son in no uncertain terms that he had made a commitment to college, and she was paying for it, and this was no time to engage in radical politics. Pastor Mark on the other end of the phone asked her how her son responded. She sighed, and the conversation got quiet.

With a lump in her throat that unfolded into a sob, she recalled how her son had said, “but mom, this isn't politics. This is about following Jesus. We're going as a Christian group. Didn't you and the church teach me that Jesus was always befriending people who were weak and suffering?”

Pastor Mark waited while she cried. Then with a hint of resignation in her voice, finally the mother said, “He’s right, you know. I know he’s right. But if I knew he was going to do something like this I would have taken him out of the church and put him in Boy Scouts instead.”<sup>4</sup>

V.

No offense to any Boy Scouts in the room. But isn’t that what we are called to be as the church? To be the people that, when nothing else matters, our love for God in Christ, our love for one another, our commitment to live lives so full of that love that it spills in faithful action for the world. To be the people that lay the firm foundation upon which this world can be built.

Is that not our call? I believe that it is – that which strengthens us and this world.

So if we go from this place with bold love for God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people – with this as our clarion call, as our instructions for this world, then we might just be ones who bring about the kingdom of God in this world.

I believe that it is possible. May it be so! Amen!

---

<sup>4</sup> As told by Jakob Topper in his sermon “Go Your Own Way” preached at Wilshire Baptist Church on September 4, 2016. It can be found here: [https://www.wilshirebc.org/download\\_file/view/3788/](https://www.wilshirebc.org/download_file/view/3788/).