

# Welcome, embrace, share

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,  
at the eleven o'clock service, September 5, 2010: The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost.  
Based on Luke 14:25-33*

Some of you may know that my major responsibility here at St. Bartholomew's Church is leading our Welcome and Membership ministries. This is holy work that I dearly love, and I especially enjoy sharing that work with many of you and with my clergy and staff colleagues. St. Bart's is a big place with a big heart, and a lot of moving parts, so it takes all of us to extend, as we say, "God's radical welcome" to all who enter here, honoring each person's journey and helping each person who wishes to belong and get connected within this community of faith.

This is Labor Day weekend, and we are savoring the last of the summer. We have a gorgeous, perfect day, Hurricane Earl having passed us by. Some here today are visiting New York for the holiday; some are seeking, perhaps not yet knowing for what; some are intentionally looking for a church (and we welcome St. Bart's shoppers!); some are already active members of this community.

The fact that you all are here in church on a holiday weekend is amazing and exciting (door prizes have been mentioned). This is good for the Welcome business! But when I hear today's Gospel, my heart skips a beat, and I think, "Uh oh."

*Whoever does not hate father or mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. If you do not give up all your possessions, you cannot be my disciple.*

This does not bode well for the Welcome and Membership business.

To belong here, do I really have to hate my family, carry a cross and give up all my possessions? No. Look around you. If that were the price of admission, this place would be empty. So what do these harsh-sounding words mean? If we look beneath the surface, we find some clues. Here are three.

First: These large crowds traveling with Jesus. Think groupies. Because of his preaching and teaching and his powerful, miraculous healings, Jesus is looking a lot like the Messiah these crowds have been waiting for. In this particular part of Luke's Gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. We know, as Luke's community would have known, what's going to happen in Jerusalem. But these crowds don't know that. We can imagine they are swept up in the excitement of finding the Messiah who they think is going to storm into Jerusalem and vanquish their Roman oppressors, and they want to be part of that.

Jesus gives them a reality check, a splash of cold water in the face. It's also truth in advertising. Jesus puts the terms of the contract in plain English, no fine print, no hidden fees, no unannounced rate changes. Following me, he says, is going to cost you. Know that. You'll be called to do the right thing instead of the easy thing. You'll be called to say Yes when everything inside you wants to say No. You'll be called to say No when everything inside you wants to say Yes.

These words about hating family that sound so harsh to us would have sounded many times worse to those first followers of Jesus. Not because of the word hate, but because of their understanding of family. In Jesus' time and place, family was literally everything. One did not exist apart from one's family. Your physical survival, your place in the community, your very identity

came only from your family.

Second: About that word “hate.” We know what it means to us: intense hostility, aversion, extreme dislike. For us, hate involves strong emotion, even passion. But the word that gets translated “hate” for us, to those first followers meant to turn away from, to detach oneself from, to disregard, be indifferent to. To hate one’s family in order to follow Jesus meant putting Jesus ahead of your family, ahead of even the most important thing in your life. Jesus is suggesting a fundamental shift in allegiance.

Most scholars think Jesus really did say this. He’s already redefined family: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” [Luke 8:21] These are the kinds of outrageous things Jesus said, the kinds of things that got him killed. Jesus ate dinner with everyone: tax collectors, prostitutes, Pharisees and the elite. He spoke with women. He touched lepers. He said your neighbor is the Samaritan, the one your family despises and considers unclean. He played with children. He healed everyone, from the demoniac in the tombs to a hemorrhaging woman to the child of a Roman centurion. In that rigidly stratified society, Jesus crossed all the boundaries. He messed up all the categories.

Third: The word “cannot.” This doesn’t mean cannot, as in “you are not allowed to be my disciple.” It means cannot, as in “unable, not able to,” as in I am not able to carry a grand piano across Park Avenue. I may want to do that, but I cannot—it is impossible. A few chapters later in Luke, Jesus tells a wealthy ruler to sell all that he has and give the money to the poor. For the wealthy ruler, that is impossible; he is not able to do it. To what seem impossible demands, Jesus says, “What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.” [Luke 18: 27] And earlier in Luke’s Gospel, a too-old couple has a son named John; a young virgin gives birth to a son named Jesus. And the angel said, “Nothing will be impossible with God.” [Luke 1:37]

What does it mean for us, here in September 2010, in the middle of Manhattan, to be disciples of Jesus? Is that even possible? Most

of us here have not said goodbye to all our possessions, and most of us have not, and don’t want to, distance ourselves from our families, even if nerves are starting to fray after too much togetherness over Labor Day weekend.

By definition, a disciple is one who embraces and assists in spreading the teachings of another. Can we embrace and spread the teachings of Jesus? I’d like to suggest that we understand this “embracing” as a process, rather than a yes-or-no, all-or-nothing kind of thing. It’s here in this particular kind of community that we learn from each other, and learn together, what the teachings of Jesus are. In my experience, the richest and most powerful learning I’ve done, especially about the Bible and Jesus, has been and continues to be in small groups.

Here at St. Bart’s, we are fortunate beyond imagining to have gifted, talented, passionate teachers and leaders for the children and youth of this place. From a very young age, children begin to learn here what the teachings of Jesus are, and how they might follow them, and even spread them. And of course, if you live with children, you yourself are teaching them, whether you know it or not, simply by how you act. There is no more powerful teacher than example.

I know of a family, a mother and father and their three-year-old son, who were in the habit of attending church regularly and receiving communion together. The little boy had been baptized as an infant, and his parents felt it was fine for him to receive the bread and wine. So they did that together each Sunday. One Sunday, the mother was ill, so the father and his son attended church as usual and received communion together as usual. When they got home after church, the little boy marched straight from the car into the house, went immediately to his mother, pulled his hand from behind his back and held it out to her, saying, “Mom, this is the Body of Christ.” He had saved his communion wafer and brought it for her.

Children learn by example. So do adults. We are fortunate to have committed leaders and teachers for adults here, too. Truthfully, learning

never stops, no matter what our age. Find a small group or class or a ministry and join in. Consider it on-the-job-training. We are all teachers and we are all learners here together in this disciple business.

I get asked often, “What do I have to do to be a member of St. Bart’s? What’s required of me?” Well, you can be sure I don’t quote today’s Gospel! One way that we try to embrace and spread Jesus’ teachings is by extending God’s radical welcome to all who enter here. At St. Bart’s, we use that term “radical welcome” a lot, so we need to remember it’s *God’s* radical welcome we’re extending, not a marketing gimmick we made up. This radical welcome says: no matter who you are, or what you wear, or what you’ve done or not done, you are welcome here in this place and around this table.

This radical welcome invites all of us to pray and worship together, to keep studying and learning about other faiths as well as our own; to strengthen this community by giving our time and talent, and yes, frankly, our money; to serve others and work for justice both in and beyond this congregation; to keep inviting others in; and to keep sharing what we find here.

This radical welcome doesn’t pretend to have it all figured out and all together, but instead recognizes that each of us, and the Church, is very much a work in progress as we keep learning what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and trying to live that out, even when it costs us.

Welcome to this place, where we follow, as best we can, this Jesus—this boundary crosser, this boundary dissolver, this One who tells the truth and turns the world upside down. Who turns the world upside down to show us how much God loves us—each and every one of us, no matter who we are, or what we wear, or what we’ve done or not done.

Each and every one of us. As we are, and are becoming.

That’s very Good News. Welcome it. Embrace it. Share it.

*Note: I am indebted to the Rev. Brian Stoffregen, Lutheran pastor in Marysville CA, for this interpretation of “cannot.”*

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*For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at [www.stbarts.org](http://www.stbarts.org).*