

# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

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## Truth telling

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, September 8, 2013  
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 14:25-33*

Jesus said, "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." Well, all righty then: Welcome home, everybody! After a lovely time away, it is just wonderful to be back in this pulpit today to bring such delightful news from the gospel of Luke: Hate all those we are supposed to love most in this world, words attributed to Jesus, no less, the Prince of Peace, the Good Shepherd, the one who admonishes again and again, "Love, love, love." Surely there must be some mistake, some grave misinterpretation from the original, some redaction gone awry, some something! Surely.

Or maybe not. If you are among those who have read or are reading *Zealot*, Reza Aslan's new book, these words attributed to Jesus may not seem too surprising. In second place on the New York Times Bestseller List, *Zealot*, whose author will be my guest next week in the Forum, paints a picture of a Jesus one could easily imagine making such remarks. Aslan, not the first to speculate about this possibility, but now certainly the most famous to do so, claims that Jesus was a zealot, a forerunner of a group of Jews who became officially known as the Zealot Party after the Jewish revolt against the Romans in 66 BCE.

Prior to their congealing into an organized group, Jesus, Aslan argues, was one in a series of charismatic leaders who developed a zealous following during a particularly desperate time in Jewish history. First century Palestine was exceedingly hard on all but the very rich. Whatever else you may think of Aslan's book, to read his description of what it was like for poor Jews in this era is well worth the read. I believe it correctly and dramatically presents the kind of environment in which Jesus grew up. Though it is true that the Romans were fairly respectful of the religions of their conquests, peaceful coexistence came at a great price, particularly the weakening, or as zealots would understand, the annihilation of the devout practice of a faithful Jew. The affluent Jews were those who cooperated most completely with the Romans, bending far away from the real demands of Jewish code. The complicity of the Jewish aristocracy with the conquerors and their tepid following of Jewish traditions led the zealots, who believed themselves to be the real keepers of the faith, made them as hated as the contemptible Romans.

So whether or not Jesus was truly a forerunner of the Zealots, given his own poverty as a resident of Nazareth, a tiny village of insignificant Jewish peasants, his affiliation with John the Baptist, the fiery prophet, and the brutal manner of his own death at the hands of the Romans, there can be little doubt that Jesus' message, even if it did somehow in its entirety turn on an axis of love, was radical and disturbing to the Empire. We often refer, correctly I believe, to the writing of this time as apocalyptic but in a way that diminishes the desperation that gave rise to it. Reading Aslan's book reminded me that the circumstances of Jesus' time were not *like* a dystopian novel or movie: they were dystopian—crushing poverty, totalitarianism, disruption of social order abounded: all were there.

Jesus' call, then, to those who were inclined to another way, indeed to a way out of the desperate circumstances of their lives, was radical enough that we might well imagine his saying, "All that you have held to be true, even the unbreakable ties of familial love, you must be willing to give up if we are to find ourselves a way out of this ungodly mess." His words were designed to rattle and awaken the faithful.

This passage is about Jesus, a figure we revere, of course, but one whom we recognize as a historical character, molded as all historical characters are by the zeitgeist of one's time. About that we can largely agree, but how, then, does this story of Jesus translate to us as a message of the Christ of our faith? Do we dismiss these words as bound to a particular time in history with little relevance to us? In a way, we do. Absolutely we do and, I think, without impunity. Reading the Bible, even the Gospels, without aid of historical criticism is—for me—probably irresponsible and undoubtedly unhelpful.

But we are unwise if we dismiss them completely, for in the mystery of sacred scripture we are led to look for how these words, written so clearly about a time utterly different from ours, may still have something to say to us today. It is a dilemma—this Christian business. If forced to categorize I will, of

course, say that I am a Christian; but what is for me much nearer the truth is that “I am becoming a Christian,” or that “I am sometimes largely a Christian and at other times more honestly I should mark the ‘unknown’ box on the questionnaire.” For you see, the truth, which these hard words of Jesus so brilliantly claim, is that being molded in the mind of Christ, taking on the mind of Christ, which is what being a Christian truly means, requires that we be “all in.” And, let’s face it: Most of us are rarely all in; we are often largely in, certainly culturally in, but all in? No—not most of us.

Somewhat unexpectedly, events in the last few weeks have stirred me deeply in reminding me of the cost of discipleship—of the cost of being all in. The 50-year anniversary of Martin Luther King’s “Dream” speech and the march on Washington, accentuated no doubt by great planning and marketing of Lee Daniels’ movie, *The Butler*, which is a must-see, brought back intense images from my own childhood. Though just ten years old at the time of the speech, I remember quite vividly then, and especially in the years that followed, the ways in which families were divided over the civil rights movement, mothers against daughters and sons against fathers, one side right and one clearly wrong but both hurt and apart, sometimes the divide never to be fully repaired. “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.” Happy Christian homes? Not hardly. These were Christian homes torn apart by one view of a beatific Jesus which kept everything and the order the same, and a conflicting view of Jesus which demanded the tearing down of structures that held one group down so the other could flourish.

Truth telling in families is often the hardest and most adult thing we ever manage to do, for in language reminiscent of Jesus’ shocking remark, it often destroys the constructions we have allowed and engaged that keep us from answering God’s call to us. Whether to zealotry or not, the call of God is huge; and even for one as culturally attuned and assimilated as I clearly am, I must admit that it is not the tepid, lukewarm response that our version of Christianity often suggests. God, I believe, is calling us to be “all in.”

And the struggle goes on from one issue to the next. Now there is the reality of Syria and the egregious and unforgivable use of chemical weapons. My guess is that sometime in the coming week we will employ more violence in our search for peace in the Middle East. And though I am constantly fretful about upsetting parishioners and just about anyone else, I know that *for me* more military might is just not the answer. For one thing its use is too capricious: we have not employed it in the Congo, we didn’t employ it in Rwanda, places where countless children have died, equally and arguably worse deaths—should something even be so imaginable. Can it be true of us that because they died in places farther removed from the intervention of other world powers like Russia or in places less perilously close to the elixir of our world, oil, or because their skin is darker, we seem to be able to close our eyes more easily to them than to others. Surely that cannot be true but surely we must ask.

Following Christ, answering the call of God, is not always as polite as I doggedly try to make it. If we take it seriously, sometimes it tears us up on the inside and apart from one another on the outside. But somehow (and thank God for it) the Christ of our faith provides us—through the mystery of the imperfect church—a crucible in which we can hold our differing views and even find a way to love one another. It does so by giving us a liturgy, one that defies our understanding but somehow unites us by demanding the common confession that even our best answers may not be the right or only answer. Each week when we make this solemn walk to an almost incredibly open and transformative altar, we admit with every step our dependence upon God alone to know what is right and good. Beyond rendering all of us equal before God, it stirs the waters of our soul every time; and though we know we don’t know where it will lead and fear where it might, in our hearts we know that our lives depend upon it.

In the name of God: *Amen*.