

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on September 4, 2016	On the occasion of the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18C

Luke 14:25-33

Deny Everybody and Take Up Your Cross

Have you seen the TV show “Tiny House Nation”? Apparently there’s this trend in the housing market for people to live in so called tiny homes. People choose to live in these really small houses, like sometimes no more than 300 square feet. They may be seeking freedom from the financial demands of a full sized home. Or they may be looking for simplicity in their lives. On this show they work with people to build them their dream tiny home. They help them to design a tiny house that will work for their needs and interests. It’s not just single people either. If you’ve ever watched the show, or one of the other shows on the air about the tiny house movement, you’ve seen that it’s couples too that live on top of each other in these overgrown dog houses. Sometimes I’ve seen families with children too. I can’t imagine living with spouse and children in a few hundred square feet, with no place to keep toys, no place to send the kids when they get annoying, no place to escape from your family. They’re just there, in your face, all the time.

I must admit, though, that these houses are really clever. They come up with fascinating ways to solve storage problems. They create spaces and furniture that have multiple purposes. They creatively use the space within the house, utilizing the upper part with lofts for beds or play areas, and the lower parts with hidden drawers and cabinets. They make an dining table convert into a work space. They make the kitchen transform into an art studio. It’s amazing what they are able to pack into one of these tiny houses. But no matter how clever they are, no matter how creatively they use the space, everyone who moves into one of these tiny homes, whether they are moving from a full sized house, or even an apartment, they all have to down size. Of course,

this process is part of this reality TV show. They show how the host helps them thin out their stuff. They make *keep* piles and *discard* piles. They go through the *keep* stuff again to make agonizing decisions about what they can realistically take with them into their new home. It's almost like watching one of those hoarders shows sometimes because people are not willing to part with their stuff. The host calmly explains to them the practical limitations of living in a tiny home, and the personal benefits of making those tough choices and simplifying your life.

Imagine if you had to prioritize everything in your life. Imagine if you had to make painful decisions about what to keep and what to get rid of. Imagine if you had to decide which pieces of furniture to take with you and which ones to leave behind. Imagine if you had to decide between your two favorite hobbies because there isn't enough room for both. Imagine if you had to decide which of your pets you were going to give up. Imagine if you had to decide which of your children you were going to leave behind. Ridiculous? That's kind of what Jesus is asking of us. "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," he says. Just a few chapters earlier, in chapter 9, Jesus told us that we must deny ourselves and pick up our cross and follow him. That seems to make a little more sense, doesn't it? We can wrap our minds around denying our selves. We can get that selfishness and self-centeredness have no place in God's kingdom. But why must I hate my father and my mother? Why must I hate my wife and my children? Why must I hate my brothers and my sisters? This admonition comes from the guy who taught us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Does he really mean that we should love our neighbor but hate our own family? No, of course not.

Jesus is just telling us that we're moving into a tiny house, and in that house there's only really room for one thing. So what's it going to be? We get self-denial, because we can be so

selfish and this distracts us from what's really important and the needs of others. We get that Jesus wants us to be willing to give up all of our possessions, because our possessions can end up possessing us if we're not careful. But what's more difficult for us to get, what's more counterintuitive is that our relationships can be just as distracting and deadly to us as our self-interest or our possessions.

Taking up our cross means getting our priorities set right. It means that we won't miss the kingdom because we are focused on one little corner of it. It doesn't mean that we must hate our closest family members as if they were our enemies—after all Jesus told us we should love our enemies too. Of course we should love our family members. However our close relationships can be quite demanding. They should be demanding, but we shouldn't let the demands of these relationships take us away from the primary relationship in our lives... our relationship with God. We shouldn't let our sense of loyalty to our parents prevent us from doing what we know is right. We shouldn't let our spouse keep us from the obligation to worship and serve God. We shouldn't let our children's needs and wants take priority over being a disciple of Christ.

The irony in all of this is that if we hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, but love God with our whole heart, and our whole mind, and our whole strength, then all these other relationships are returned to us redeemed and purified. Once we get our priorities straight, once we have the primary relationship in our lives as our primary relationship, then all of our other relationships become much more fulfilling. Not only can we become distracted from God's demands on us by the close relationships in our lives, but those relationships can be dysfunctional. We can love, or be loved, in a way that is self-gratifying—using each other to meet our own needs, or manipulative—trying to control one another for a sense of power in the

relationship, or overly demanding—unfairly monopolizing each other’s time and attention, or simply needy—expecting one person to fulfill all our emotional needs. The list of dysfunctional loves goes on and on. So Jesus tells us to take up our cross. That’s the tiny house that focuses us on the one truly important relationship in our lives. If we can do that, if we can allow all worldly needs and demands to fade away, if we can trust God to give us everything we really need, then we find that that narrow doorway opens up into an infinite kingdom. With clear vision and correct priorities we find that we can love, truly love those people God has placed in our lives. When we are free from selfishness, we can love generously and not allow ourselves to be drawn into destructive love. When we trust God to work out our lives, we don’t feel the need to control others and we recognize when we are being controlled in an unhealthy way. When we tune our lives to gratefulness for all the blessings God has showered on us, we no longer place unreasonable demands on others, but we appreciate what they are able to give us and we become more generous with our time and attention to them. When we realize that God provides for our every need, we no longer look to other people to make us feel whole and we realize that no matter how hard we try we cannot be the one to complete someone else’s life. Only God can do that.

Taking up our cross and following Jesus isn’t just about being willing to die for him. It is about being willing to live for him and his kingdom, being willing to accept the priorities that God places on us, being willing to allow every other relationship in our lives to be subjected to God’s perfect love, so that we may love more perfectly. If we are willing to lose everything, and everybody who is important to us, then as we gain the kingdom we receive a hundredfold over what we ever had before.

Amen.