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## Crossroads

Luke 14:25-33

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on September 4, 2016 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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Good morning. Welcome to my class, “Discipleship 101.” I’m your professor, Luke A. Powery. I’m so happy to see that you found our room and that most of you showed up on time. Before we start, let me lay some ground rules for our class. First, though it may be the name you think of when you first hear my name, no one should call me Dr. Luke Skywalker. Second, as noted last week, there are cameras running, so please, no sleeping, nor especially drooling is allowed; this will result in the lowering of your grade in spiritual health. Third, please do not use your cell phones unless you’re tweeting quotes from the sermon. Fourth, the class doesn’t always have to be silent, though intentional listening is appreciated, but every now and then, someone is free to say, “Amen” (hopefully not “Oh, my”). As we begin this journey together at the beginning of another academic year, it’s always good to be reminded of why we are taking this class in the first place and why we might consider ourselves disciples. There are many places to begin this conversation but I thought the gospel of Luke, my favorite gospel for obvious reasons, would be a good place to start.

The *first lesson* of this course is to remember that as a disciple you are not the teacher, but a follower, a student in the seminar of God. I realize that this may be hard to swallow because Duke makes and shapes leaders who aim to change the world. But someone else taught every leader at some point and the best leaders are eternally curious students. You might think and ask, and I’m glad you did, “Well, who is the teacher?” Jesus. You know the one who was born in a feeding trough and is the bread of life. The one who caused the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the lepers to be cleansed. The one who eats with tax collectors and sinners. The one who defeats devils but somehow still loves blue devils. If we forget Jesus is our leader we might as well end this class right now and I can assign a flat F for everyone.

But if you are a follower, a disciple of Jesus, you should know something about him, if you haven’t figured it out up to this point; he’s always on the move. He loves traveling, low country and high country. You can find him in temples, up on mountains, in deserts, on boats, walking on water, eating meals with friends and enemies. And today we hear that “large crowds were traveling with him.” Everyone wants to be with Jesus but I’m not sure everyone wants to follow his every footstep. Jesus is on the move and as a disciple that means the Christian life is migratory; it’s a journey, a pilgrimage. “Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land.” The journey never stops even if we are tired and Jesus never does either, which is why he had nowhere to lay his head (Luke 9:58). I believe he’s traveling through Duke Chapel today. And you might want to know where’s headed according to the gospel of Luke. Jesus is traveling to Jerusalem toward a cross (cf. Luke 9:51). Oh, oh. Maybe this isn’t what you signed up for, but know that you have two weeks to decide whether you want to drop this class. As a follower, as a disciple of Jesus, you might be heading the same way too.

You may even be thinking, “Wait one minute, God. The academic calendar just started and I really don’t want to get too deep too quickly. Lighten up a little bit at the beginning of this class.” But as your professor, I don’t want you to be like that builder Jesus talks about who “began to build but was not able to finish.” I want you to finish what you start. Finish what began at your baptism. Run the race of faith and cross the finish line. That’s real good advice for research papers and club sports and difficult conversations with friends and families. Finish what you start. You began this semester and we—faculty, administration, and staff— want you to finish it. You started as a freshman and we want you to finish as a graduating senior. Jesus puts it another way when he talks about salt: “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” Like salt can lose its savor, so can our commitments wane or fade over time so we never finish what we begin. Like any long journey, a trip with Jesus is

not a luxury vacation in a five star beachfront resort yet the hope of Christ, and my hope, is that you would count the cost of following him and discover it was worth it and continue on, despite what you may face.

I mentioned earlier where Jesus was headed, which means when you follow him, and this is the *second lesson*, you'll often find yourself at a crossroads or what I call the 'cross road.' You can't call an Uber driver to help you figure out which way to go; even if you did that driver may never show up because he or she doesn't want go on the road Jesus travels because it's not the smoothest or quickest or clearest way; there isn't an app to help you discern God's voice. A crossroads, according to that highly reliable online academic resource, Wikipedia, is a junction where four roads meet. You travel down one path to get to that spot on the journey and then have at least three other directions you can go in, though in our upcoming presidential election we only have two choices as the nation finds itself at a crossroads as well. What direction will we take? Who would choose to take the Presidential road if what John Adams says is true—that “No man who ever held the office of president would congratulate a friend on obtaining it”?

However, I congratulate the incoming Duke students for being accepted into dear old Duke. These new students traveled from 70 countries and 49 states, with one state missing—South Dakota. Students are from Baton Rouge and Boise and Beverly Hills and Caracas and Corpus Christi and Cary and Delhi and Detroit. But regardless of where you are from, all of you, all of us, are at a crossing, a crossroads, today, where we have to make decisions about how we're going to use our time and talents. Students have chosen classes already. Supposedly, I'm told that sleep is the last thing on your list of choices these days so you'll be choosing what other activities to do—what club, fraternity, or sorority to join, where you will travel for research. Do I want to sing in one of the chapel's choirs? Do I want to volunteer to usher? Do I want to get involved in community outreach efforts or participate in new initiatives around faith and the arts? Who might you date? (this question is not meant for the married couples here). At a crossroads, you have options, choices, even as a disciple of Jesus on his holy trail. He won't force you to follow him. He may just say, “Come and see” (John 1).

But at this crossroad, there are three directional options. Luke draws our attention to these by his literary technique called *inclusio*. Three times he uses the refrain, “Whoever does not...cannot be my disciple” (vv. 26, 27, 33). The first direction you can choose to take at the crossroads is to love your family and love life. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Until you hear Jesus say, “Whoever does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” In hip-hop parlance, one might say there seems to be a call to hateration. Hate father and mother, brothers and sisters? Diss and dismiss my family? Hate life itself? “Lord, it is nice to have some distance from my family and have some independence but this hate thing is too much. Isn't there enough hate in the world?” Hate life? “I'm young and I have a lot going for me. I'm loving life right now. Heck, I'm a Dukie and a Robertson scholar. I'm a student-athlete on scholarship. Dude, life is good. I'm too blessed to be stressed. I'm married to one spouse. I have two kids, one dog, and I'm an Iron Duke member. My daily mantra is 'God is good all the time and all the time God is good' and you want me to hate life?”

We're more like one of today's musical artists:

*So you gots to dance for me  
Don't need no hateration, holleration  
In this dancierie  
Let's get it percolatin', while you're waiting  
So just dance for me (Mary J. Blige)*

Life is a party. “Celebrate, good time, come one!” What's this hate all about?

'Hate' in this ancient setting is Semitic hyperbole. It really means a secondary form of love—to love less. It means following Jesus is more important than anything else. 'Hate' means to turn away from, to detach oneself, in this case,

from family. This might be good advice if you have helicopter parents who are always buzzing around you or parents who are like a Blackhawk copter with far more force and intrusive power or even snowplow parents, clearing the road right in front of their kids so they can't possibly encounter any dangers (Larry Moneta). In these cases, detachment would be really helpful. Hating life itself is not a call to self-loathing, to see oneself as a dirty Tarheel blue worm slithering in the soil or a fly that loves to keep getting hit by a fly swat. Rather, it's about detachment from self to gain one's true self.

At the crossroads, you may discover who you really are and what you really desire and what you really believe. There's another direction you can take too—hoard, protect, and love your possessions. You worked hard for them. You earned it. You pulled yourself up by your bootstraps to get it, too. Possessions by themselves may not be bad but the love of them, just as the love of money is the root of evil, not money itself, is the problem. "Whoever doesn't give up your possessions... cannot be my disciple." But if you are possessed by your possessions then what Jesus teaches is highly relevant. In a previous parable Jesus tells of how invited guests to a dinner "began to make excuses" (14:18) not to attend this dinner because of land, oxen, and family. The invitees chose social security and economic security over security in Christ. They were attached to family and possessions and lost the opportunity of a lifetime. The crossroads provide opportunities for us to become detached from some things in order to become attached to other things.

Thus, there is a third direction you should travel when you follow Jesus. You may give up some things while grabbing ahold of other things. At this crossroad, in this particular direction, there's no family system to hold your hand or possessions to consume you; there's no safety net except the safe arms of Christ. The path Jesus walks is thorny and feels like splintered wood. It's not surprising that at this crossroad, there is a cross. Crossroads are just like this Chapel—cruciform. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." There you are on this path and the only thing you hold is a symbol of a common criminal? You are innocent but viewed as a problem because of what you are carrying. "How does it feel to be a problem?" (W.E. B Dubois) when all you are seeking is life by attaching yourself to a cross like a condemned criminal with the horizontal beam of the cross hoisted on your back. Tell me if you want to drop this class right now. This literal "cross road" is difficult and takes courage because you have to finish what you started when sometimes it's easier just to give up or go in a totally different direction. Crossroads can be a point of reckoning where you have to decide what you really want to do—with your future, your relationships, your career, your faith. It can be hard to make tough decisions, especially when you are bearing the weight of a cross.

Let's be clear that wearing a shining cross around one's neck is not the same as bearing one on one's body. As disciples of Jesus, a cross marks us, even as we sign ourselves or worship under the symbol of a cross in this sacred space. When you reach a crossroads, you'll recognize that everyone has a cross to bear. Everyone has some kind of weight to carry, which is why the wisdom of this saying is so true—"Be kind; for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle." Jesus never said being a disciple was pain free. Traveling with Jesus means your luggage is the weight of a cross. For some it might mean carrying burdens of those who are the least of these or the marginalized, even if you are ridiculed for it. The crosses we carry may vary but all of our burdens are on the cross of Christ.

Even preachers, believe or not, carry a cross. Rev. Gardner Taylor once called preaching "sweet torture." We may not recognize this when preachers have their own TV talk or reality shows or stump for political candidates. We might think, "They have a great life." "What a job you have, dean Luke! Only having to work one day a week on Sundays!" But remember, here I am high and lifted up and you know what that means—you can be crucified! "Crucify him, crucify him!" I told my preaching class this past week that I'm not sure preaching is something you ever want to do but is something you are called to do and can't help but do. I mean "God, I wouldn't mind being a CEO in the Silicon Valley one day in a state that is dipped in gold." Now that may be what I want to do but it's not what I'm called to do. Jesus loves to travel but I don't think he's settling in the Silicon Valley.

Now don't get me wrong. There's joy on the journey with Jesus but there's also great responsibility, a great weight. How can it be anything else when you take up a cross and know that you are headed to Jerusalem and there's a death row on a holy hill waiting for Jesus? You didn't sign up for that when you became a Christian did you? This is why it's so important for me to teach about the crossroads in "Discipleship 101" because it's not taught so often in the curriculum.

I don't blame the dean of the school of discipleship because if we advertised the reality of the crossroads, no one may sign up for the class. To loosen oneself from familial relationships and possessions, your security blankets, and only be left with a cross, yourself, Jesus, and the other cross bearers, the other disciples? I'm not so sure that's good PR for the course though it would be truthful advertising. You detach but then find yourself attached not only to the cross of Christ but his body and we are his body, which means you are not alone because the cross connects us.

A disciple seems always to be at a crossing and a crossing is where north, south, east, and west meet. That's what crossings in cathedrals are all about. The point where the chancel, nave, and transepts meet is the crossing. It's the location where the four arms of the cruciform church meet. The crossing junction often involves an elaborate system of arches, as each arm of the church must be supported where it meets the others. In some churches the arches supporting the crossing rise up to form a lantern tower above the crossing. Because the crossing is open on four sides, the weight of the tower or dome rests heavily on the corners. In past centuries, it wasn't unusual for oversized crossing towers to collapse at the crossing. The crossing is where you'll find the extra support as there's extra weight at that junction many times. But the weight doesn't have to break you. It may actually make you who you are supposed to be, showing you the direction you need to go. Not the easier route but the riskier, more challenging, one.

You might think a cross is a huge burden to carry with lots of stress adding to an already stressful life so much so that you get stressed out about stress. But recent medical studies reveal that acute stress, as opposed to chronic stress, can be good for you. There is an upside just as the upside of the cross is that it turns your world upside down making carrying it actually life-giving, not just death-wielding.

At the crossing in cathedral buildings, each arm of the church is supported. At the crossing, there may be the most pressure but there is also extra support! This is my *third lesson* for today. At the cross road, we are not alone in this large crowd. We are Christ's body collectively thus we carry the cross together. Poet Malcolm Guite puts it this way:

*We are wounded on the road, but we share each others load,  
And make each other angels unawares...*

*Sometimes we get lost and the threads of our lives get crossed  
But I'm sure glad yours got tangled up with mine.*

Our lives get crossed with each other at the crossing and we bear one another's burdens. Rather than taking up arms against each other, we take up a cross and don't get cross at each other.

I recognize that today's class doesn't aim to provide advice—"Four Ways to Get Rid of the Cross" or "Five Ways to Raise your Religious GPA" or "Six Drinks to Have When at a Crossroads." As my Calvin seminary colleague, Scott Hoezee writes, "Good advice has eclipsed—or supplanted—good news in many pulpits." This class has aimed to provide good news on your journey because the good news is the truth, tells the truth, and isn't a temporary fix where all we have to do is check the boxes and feel better about ourselves.

The truth is good news in the end. And the truth is—and my *fourth and final lesson* is—that Christ blesses us with a cross, not to burden us but to free us from a false sense of security apart from him. To free us enough to live the life

for which Christ died. To free us enough not to allow our possessions and people to possess us and lure us down a road we would ultimately regret. The cross causes us to be honest, truth tellers, to become acquainted with God through grief, sorrow, and the weight of life while being set free from social or economic crutches in order to bear crosses, for we are at a crossroads like it or not. What direction will you take this year?

Jesus is traveling through Duke. Will you follow him? He wants to bless you just as the wooden carving of Christ is doing at the top of this pulpit canopy, where his right hand is raised in the sign of a blessing. He's facing out toward the direction of the Chapel crossing to see what we'll do at the crossroads.

I hope today's first class of "Discipleship 101" didn't scare you. I hope to see you next week. Have a great day and when you leave, there's a sweet treat for the first day, waiting for you. My teaching assistants will have Locopops for you outside for being such attentive students. Thank you. Class is dismissed.