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I get asked from time to time why I became a priest of the church. Often the expectation of the one asking, I think, is that I must have had some sort of Damascus Road experience, a flash of light, or that I heard the voice of God.... But the truth is, I think I always knew that one day I would give my professional life to the church. As a child my family and I went to early church. Bill Acosta was the rector of Nativity Dothan in those days... the worst preacher ever! He was relentlessly faithful, but he couldn't preach. Perhaps for that reason he didn't preach at the 7:30 service; he only preached at the 11:00 service, so my parents decided to avoid his rambling and disjointed sermons by going to early church instead of at 11:00. I joined the acolyte guild at age twelve, and many an early Sunday morning Bill Acosta and I would vest together in his office preparing for the Eucharist. I listened half-awake to his ramblings; about his Sunday school teacher; about growing up in Kentucky; his ne'er-do-well son Billy. One Sunday as we vested he looked at me... me, bleary eyed from being dragged out of bed so early, and he said, "Jim, young man, I think you are called to be a priest of the church." Thirty-five years later I entered seminary.

It came with a cost. I sold the family business; we sold our dream house; we uprooted our family and moved to Texas. We wondered how we would pay for our children's education; how would we live with less money? I'm sure Katharine wondered what it would be like married to a priest. The rigorous process of discernment in the

Episcopal Church lasts several years... but now, what I remember most about this journey was the day we left for Austin Texas.

We packed up our two cars, including two dogs and a stoic Siamese cat. Katie, fifteen, would move with us; James would return to Sewanee; Rhett would finish his senior year in high school and live with my mother. The moment had arrived... our lives would never be the same. The certainty of home had given way to ambiguous possibility. I looked in the rearview mirror at my two sons and my mother, standing in her driveway... tearful; my heart pounding, and I knew that my call in life at that moment was absurdly simple. My call, my *raison d'être*, was to simply drive west. And I realized that every ounce of energy I had was for that singular purpose... drive west. 850 miles. That was a gift of perspective. Amid the rigors of life; amid our emotions and distractions, our hopes and fears... if we would but pay attention.... There is that gift.... Perspective, a surprising clarity as to the order of things, a vision of the way ahead... and I discovered, that with perspective, comes courage.

Today's Gospel contains some of what theological pundits call the "hard sayings of Jesus." "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." This is one of those Sundays when the preacher might opt to preach on Paul's letter to his house-church colleague Philemon; but we know of course that Luke here is being dramatically rhetorical... and he's also being typological. This saying to a congregation of Jews would

harken to the Exodus account of the flight from Egypt set in the Sinai desert, in which Moses is testing the Israelites' loyalty. He tells them that unless they hate the members of their families compared to the mission they have been given from God, then they are unworthy of God's call. Legend has it that some of the Israelites proceeded to kill members of their families to prove their loyalty. So again, Luke is making the typological connection between the Jesus Movement and ancient biblical history, connecting the Jesus Movement to the venerable Judaic tradition. Both of these stories, in Exodus and in Luke, are high rhetoric, that is, they are meant to move the hearer to action... they are meant to persuade; they are not meant to be taken literally; but that doesn't mean that the writers weren't being dead serious.

New Testament scholars hone in on the issue of loyalty in this passage, that our first allegiance is to the mission of God in the world; but this story is also, perhaps more so, about perspective. It is about the cost of our decisions; it is about our self-interested distractions; it is about the singleheartedness of our purpose; it is about the stakes of our existence. It is about our true humanity.

Luke uses the image of taking up one's cross to define this perspective. We hear that phrase in the other Synoptic Gospels; we hear it in the church; in our hymnody.... But what does it mean? "Take up your cross and follow me." First and foremost, the Cross is a symbol of sacrifice; that, like Jesus of Nazareth, we give our lives for the greater good; we give our lives to the healing of a broken world.... That we are in

solidarity with the world's suffering; that we stand with the crucified of our world.... And apropos of our Gospel reading, we must recognize those things that have a hold on us; the distractions, our so-called possessions that keep us occupied with our selves, with our illusions: wealth, power, relationships... the comfort of home. But we are resurrection people, so the cross ceases to be an instrument of death for us... to the contrary it becomes, quite improbably, an instrument to life and authenticity. In the light of the resurrection the cross becomes an instrument of freedom; the freedom to live into our full humanity; a freedom unencumbered by our fears and anxieties... a freedom marked by courage... love, and joy.... And a freedom to know and act for the Truth. Death to distraction engenders life. Carrying the cross is hard and challenging work.... A paradox to be sure... but truth shows up in paradox.

The long and the short of it is that taking up this way of life is what matters most in the short lives we've been given. It is the reason we are here on this earth. Taking up your cross is to love your neighbor as you love yourself.... And here's the crucial thing: ...Luke, as well as the other Gospel scribes, are not talking about individual behavior, a personal resolution.... This is the way I'm supposed to behave. They are talking about how we live collectively. In particular, they are writing for the nation of Israel. Salvation for these writers is about the sustainability of a society of equals. The idea of a Personal salvation would have been foreign to them. The phrase, a "personal relationship with Jesus" to them would be absurd. The Gospels are first and foremost about how we

order our common life as a people.... We carry the cross as a community, not on our own, but in creative solidarity. The reason Jesus demands our raising up the poor and the outcast and the shamed and the sick is because in so doing we participate in the healing of the community, the healing of a people, making whole a broken world. That is the trajectory of salvation. Salvation is not found in an assent to a belief system. Salvation is manifest in a community that lives for the good of the whole.

Our opponent is Sin. Sin, a structural reality. Sin is best described as the collective brokenness at the hands of the powerful; sin that is embedded in our institutional life. In other words, the writers of scripture are not speaking of personal sin assuaged by personal salvation, but of the collective brokenness of our world saved by the noble ideal of sacrifice and love, which is society giving itself over to the raising up the least among us. For our own culture; in our own day and age, we need to give up the ideas of American exceptionalism, the idea of manifest destiny; the notion that we are the so-called greatest nation on earth. As a culture, as a democracy, as an economy... as a people, we need to be about the business of salvation.... A Gospel Perspective... patriotism has proven itself, a false god.

The fact that the New Testament scribes, Old Testament as well for that matter, speak of salvation as a collective enterprise, is why I say that our faith, ironically, is political; that the Gospels are political... because they speak of how we order our common life... and if the community entire is not whole, if the community entire lacks

dignity and well-being, then there is no salvation for any of us. The truth is that no one loses anything by living sacrificially. There is enough. The patriarchal theology of scarcity has plagued us for far too long. Salvation is the means of shared abundance. That is because salvation is the purpose of Love... and Love will not abide anyone left out of the ardent glow of friendship.

Speaking of sin: I, like you, am horrified at the brazen and illegal agenda of the present administration. Our government is supporting the catastrophic genocide in Gaza; it is complicit with the Russian aggression and land grab in Ukraine. Raids aimed at the deportation of immigrants are increasing daily; the lives of families utterly shattered. Our military now occupies Washington D.C. with plans to occupy other American cities. Our once cutting-edge institutions, like healthcare, education, foreign aid, and social services are being dissolved for the sake of elite, private wealth. Judicial orders to the contrary are being ignored. The two headed monster of greed and racism is the driving ideology. We are living in a nation that acts in direct opposition to the Gospel of Jesus. And as people of the Jesus Movement we must resist, no matter the cost.

Taking up the cross will cost us friendships; it may cost us harassment, but we are made for such vocation; we are invincible together. Ours is to let go of the false gods, the things that possess us, with which we surround ourselves; in their place comes surely the gift of perspective that engenders the courage to be the people we are

created to be. The Truth comes into focus with perspective.... There is the moment when our call gains enlightened clarity and unmistakable singularity.... Seize the moment, good people, even if it means to simply drive west, simply and courageously to leave those things we call home behind.