

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon Jensen  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania  
on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 8, 2019, Proper 18, Year C**

***Luke 14:25-33***

Jesus would make a terrible politician. Who says to hate your entire family, take up your cross, give up all your possessions and expects to be followed? Imagine if someone running for office said you will work longer and harder for less... you may lose your home and family... you may have to give up everything... you might not even make it out alive... Who would vote for him?

In this story, Jesus is speaking to enthusiastic crowds. They liked what he had to say. They *really* liked the miracles... unlimited bread and wine and healing on demand. This might be someone they could support. He could get rid of the foreign invaders (Romans), restore national values, fix all the problems, and make us feel good.

We expect a politician to make all sorts of promises we know he or she won't keep. Instead, Jesus *reverses* this. He says not to make a promise to follow God if you can't keep it. Become my disciples only if you are willing to go all the way. Jesus was headed towards Jerusalem where he would die on the cross on Calvary hill. Neither the crowds nor the disciples understood this. He wanted everyone to be aware of the potential costs of discipleship.

Jesus overstates to make a point. Unless you hate your family and are willing to lose everything to follow me, don't start. The word hate, here, means "to turn away from" or "separate oneself." What are you willing to give up? He gives two examples to illustrate. No one should construct a building or go to war without first counting the costs... you might never be able to finish.

Jesus is not denying love and care of one's family. That is one of the Ten Commandments, honor your father and your mother. In a similar way, he is not arguing one *must* sell everything. Jesus *is* saying, if you are going to follow God, be prepared to go all the way. Will you follow wherever that mission to love God and love your neighbor as yourself may lead?

As a politician, Jesus would be a failure. Instead, think of Jesus here as inviting followers on a great expedition to deliver urgent medical care to a remote area. This is a mission to transform... to save people through acts of love. It will be difficult and dangerous. It will test your loyalties and all you believe. You will have to leave some people and things behind but you'll never be alone. You'll be supported by those on the journey together. The mission might cost you everything... but it will change you from the inside out. Are you willing to go all the way... to love God and your neighbor as yourself? That is the invitation Jesus offers in this Gospel.

At Calvary, we have embarked on a new part of our mission to love God and our neighbors. We have partnered with the Tree of Life congregation. Today, I want to talk about why and what that might mean. The question I have been asked *most* by the Jewish community, from reporters to people on the street, is "Why are Christians opening their church to Jews?" My responses are because it's the right thing to do. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Because they are our neighbors, and we are called to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Because this focuses on what unites us rather than what divides us. Because sharing space with those in need is an expression of love in action. That is all second grader theology but all true.

But I'm going to tell you the main reason why. It's because of a man named Judah Touro. Touro's story has been in the back of my mind for twenty years. I worked at Christ Church in New Orleans and first heard about him. The story made a lasting impression. He is a symbol of loving God and neighbor, of putting prayer in action, that inspires me.

Judah grew up in New England. His father, who was the cantor in his synagogue, died so the family moved in with his uncle, a merchant. Then his mother died. As a young man, Judah fell in love with someone but his uncle did not approve. He was sent to the Caribbean in hopes of ending the romance.

In 1801, at age 26, he moved to New Orleans. He opened a shop selling fish, candles, and soap. The city soon experienced massive growth and prosperity with the Louisiana Purchase. His business flourished and expanded to real estate and shipping making him one of the wealthiest people in the city... and one of its only Jews. At the time, there was only one non-Roman Catholic Church in the city. Christ Episcopal Church was founded in 1805 as the first Protestant church in the Louisiana Territory.

Touro's office on Canal St. was next to the office of a man named Rezin Shepherd. Shepherd was a businessman and on the vestry of Christ Episcopal Church. As fate would have it, being a Jew or a Protestant made them both outsiders. They were neighbors who became best friends.

Both friends enlisted in Andrew Jackson's army in the Battle of New Orleans in 1815. Touro was assigned to carry ammunition. During a battle, he was struck in the thigh by a 12-pound shot. He was left for dead by the doctors. His best friend heard about his injury. Shepherd found Touro, took him by cart to his own home, hired doctors, and nursed him back to health.

He was in bed for close to a year recovering. I always wondered what he thought about or what he and his best friend discussed for that year. From soon after his recovery until his death, Judah Touro rented a pew at Christ Church. This would be the equivalent of him making an annual pledge to an Episcopal church, from a Jew, for 25 years.

I knew of him for his philanthropy. He built libraries, an orphanage, a synagogue, and a church. He funded an infirmary that became the largest hospital in the state. He gave to help found what is now called Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. He gave to Jewish, Christian, and other charities.

In 1840, Christ Episcopal Church was in great financial difficulty. They thought their only recourse was to sell the rectory. They were also selling cemetery plots but did not make enough except in epidemic years. Judah Touro came to the rescue and bought the property.

In 1847, Christ Church was again in financial trouble when they needed to move due to the building crumbling around them. Once again, Judah Touro was approached. He bought the church and lot for a generous amount. He remodeled the building and gave it to a Jewish congregation. He built a Hebrew school next to it and then moved into the old rectory. He worshipped there the rest of his life. He lived modestly and always observed the sabbath.

At the end of his life, he gave half of his money to charities all over the country, mostly synagogues. He gave the other half to his best friend. Mr. Shepherd, in turn, gave it all to charities Touro supported. All walks of life of people from the city attended his funeral.

Why did Judah Touro do all that? Because it was the right thing to do? Was it because his best friend saved his life? Did they become friends because they were neighbors? Because they were both outsiders? People don't break out of our bubbles that much now let alone 200 years ago. Was it because of his faith?

In a strange way, I think Judah Touro embodied what Jesus is getting at in this Gospel. He lost his father, then his mother, then his first love, then his home and family, and almost lost his livelihood and life in battle. He counted the costs and was not afraid to go all the way to know what it means to love God and his neighbor as himself.

He was changed from the inside out, in part, because he and Rezin Shepherd were strangers, then neighbors, then friends. Neighbors cross boundaries and redefine them. That relationship transformed both of them and the city for much good. The rest of his life became a type of mission to carry out acts of love with Jews, with Christians, with people he had never met.

I don't know where this relationship with Tree of Life might lead. It may be exciting or meaningful or costly or scary or inconvenient or lots of work. It may call us to question what we – and they – believe and why. This is an act that says we are stronger than hate. This is part of a mission to transform the world through acts of love. And you are invited to be a part of it.

*Notes: So Great a Good: A History of the Episcopal Church in Louisiana and of Christ Church Cathedral 1805-1955*

*The oldest synagogue in the United States is named for Judah's father, Isaac Touro. It is located in Newport, RI.*

*Initial idea about Jesus as a politician or on a mission is from N.T. Wright.*