

Sunday, September 8, 2013: Luke 14:25-33

by [Shauna K. Hannan](#) in the [September 4, 2013](#) issue

For many congregations, September 8 is Rally Sunday. Sunday school begins again. Worship times are restored. The people attending worship have a freshness and excitement about them. Toddlers have grown a size or two, seventh graders are eighth graders, parents are rested from vacations, and some adults have married or added a child their families. What is God's will for this rejuvenated lot? "Therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions." What? Jesus is kidding, right? Give them up? What about all of those goodies we acquired over the summer? Our boats, bicycles, hiking gear and video cameras?

If you dare to preach this message about possessions (not to mention the message about "hating" one's family members and carrying a cross), you may find yourself about as popular as Jeremiah was when he exhorted God's people to turn from their evil ways. Then again, you may lead others or be led yourself to a renewed commitment to Christian discipleship.

I have a complicated relationship with things. I think that I live simply and am aware of my acquisitions and spending. I walk instead of taking a taxi. I have been known to pitch a tent rather than stay in a five-star hotel. I shop at a Habitat for Humanity ReStore instead of at Home Depot. I can live out of a backpack for weeks. Yet I'm looking around as I write this and see that I have more in this one room than many people have in an entire house. It's embarrassing. Do I think I am exempt from Jesus' demands? Maybe I've used fancy exegetical skills to justify my possessions on the basis of my frugality.

If I'm honest, I have no plans to give up all that I have. And I don't believe that this essay will lead you to give up all that you have. (Have you ever met anyone who gave up all of his or her possessions?) I've preached on these words many times but never have had the nerve to be this honest. Yet honesty seems to be the first clue as we reflect on this message.

Why is it that I cannot give up my possessions even when I know that this is what discipleship requires? Am I like that impulsive builder who begins construction

before being sure the project can be completed? I have begun my walk of discipleship knowing that I can never do what is required if I am to truly follow Jesus. My fear is too great. I fall short. I cannot release myself from my possessions. In other words, I need Jesus. This realization changes how I read the rest of the gospel. If I see myself as the tax collector, the sinner or the lost sheep, I hear Jesus' words differently, and this makes all the difference.

I recall an experience that suggested to me that Jesus is on to something in this passage. I was backpacking through Bolivia and had a choice to make. I could take a bus that would travel on a direct route to my destination or—and this was much less expensive—I could choose the make-every-stop, two-persons-and-a-chicken-per-seat, cross-your-fingers-you'll-get-there option. I chose the second option, trusting that the experience would be worth every boliviano. I was the only non-Bolivian on that bus.

Packed with people, poultry and produce, the bus wound around slowly through the Andes Mountains. At one point we encountered one of the faster, more expensive buses. Apparently it was not exempt from the struggle to make it up the hills and had stalled halfway up. The driver came over to our bus driver, and the two men had an exchange that began civilly but quickly escalated to argument.

The other bus driver was insisting that we change buses, and our bus driver was shaking his head. Why would he want to put his passengers on a stalled bus? The riders on our bus agreed and began to chant, "*No vamos a bajar*" ("We are not going to disembark"). This real-life enactment of the motto on Bolivia's coin, *La unión es la fuerza* ("Union is strength"), prompted the other driver to open the lower luggage compartment on our bus and threaten to throw its contents over the cliff. Now the threat had become reality. People whose livelihoods depended on the contents of those bags and suitcases were willing to part with their possessions for the sake of principle.

Then it all became personal. I looked out the window and realized that the insistent bus driver was now holding my purple Kelty backpack in his hands! He was using my relationship to my possessions (all that I had for weeks) to lure me off the bus. No one else had succumbed to the temptation. Would I? Next thing I knew I had joined my fellow passengers in chanting, "*No vamos a bajar. No vamos a bajar.*" Eventually the other bus driver backed off and we continued on our way.

In that one instance I was willing to give up my possessions. I felt terribly vulnerable yet surprisingly freed. Yes, I had the means to replace all of the contents of my backpack and soon did. But in that one moment, when I was willing to let go of my “things,” I experienced that vulnerable freedom to which Jesus is calling us.

Rally Sunday is the perfect time for communal reflection on this call to vulnerable freedom. It is good to know that when God calls disciples, God can work with anyone who responds—with our good intentions, our unwillingness and our renewed commitments to rethink our relationship to our possessions.