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**Title:** Journey to Jerusalem: Joy

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**Scripture:** [Luke 15:1-10](#)

**Text:** [Luke 14:15-33](#)

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Save the date. That's the way things are done now. Couples getting married send a "save-the-date" magnet, 9 to 12 months before their wedding. They want you to put their event on the calendar and look for a future, official invitation. Anniversaries and retirement celebrations are

taking the hint. Give people a heads up that something exciting, memorable, joy-filled is going to happen. Save the date is a new way of doing business. Or is it?

Save the date is as old as the Bible and we'll see an example of it when Jesus tells a story about a banquet. That's the starting place for understanding Jesus invitation to respond, to follow him. You'd think that was behind us. On the first week of Lent, the theme was 'Follow'. Jesus made it sound almost impossible like Jesus didn't want disciples. Do you remember? Leave the dead to bury the dead. Don't kiss family good-bye. Don't look back. Now, Jesus brings it up again, not once but twice, suggesting that we must continuously count the costs and evaluate how we will respond. He does so by telling stories.

The first story is a parable offered at a dinner party. Jesus says, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many." (Luke 4:16) That's Jesus' way of saying he sent 'save-the-date' invitations. It was the social custom of the time to extend an invitation in advance, to save the date. The difference from the practice today is a response was required when the invitation to save the date was made. "Yes or no. Are you coming or not? It's going to be a wonderful banquet, a joyful occasion with lots to eat or drink. Are you in or out?" I think save the date invitations today would benefit from this upfront acceptance requirement. You'd know in advance how big the party was going to be, how many were coming to the wedding reception, the retirement banquet. The man who gave the

great dinner did. He knew in advance because that was the custom. Then, "At the time for the dinner, he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, (saying) "Come; for everything is ready now.'" (Luke 14:17) He went to those who, at the time of the save the date invitation said, "Yes, absolutely, I'll be there. It's the calendar. I love a party and I especially love cake. Can't wait."

But something happened between the "save-the-date" invitation and the "foods on the table" invitation. The excuses just started rolling in. "The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have bought five yokes of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come'" (Luke 14:18-20)

These are not feeble excuses. "There is nothing about faulty alarm clocks, heavy traffic, a bad night's sleep or misplaced calendars. The first two excuses were about business and the third was about the obligation of family and each of the three would have been honored in first-century society. In fact, marriage exempted one from many duties and responsibilities in Israel and is found in Deuteronomy."<sup>1</sup> Those who reneged on their initial "save-the-date" yes, had good excuses. But that's just the point. In real life, there are lots of examples of things that get in the way of responding, attractive alternatives. We could spend the rest of the day coming up with a long list of excuses that you use, I use, the many who aren't here use, not to respond. I'm just too busy at work. We'll be gone on spring break. We've got family in town. We have a soccer game on Sunday. I'm just so tired from the week.

But excuses are not the point Jesus is making. Rather, it is this. Those who offer excuses will not experience the joy of the banquet. The call to respond has a cost but comes with a reward. Every well-reasoned excuse, every possession that demands attention, every familial responsibility that takes priority comes with potential spiritual liability. It limits joy. Can't get to the banquet, you won't experience joy.

This first example that Jesus offers was at a dinner party and the joy of a great banquet. The second example comes not at a dinner party but in a crowd. He leaves the banquet and continues on his way to Jerusalem and as he does "...large crowds were traveling with him..." (Luke 14:25a) When Luke mentions large crowds, he isn't

talking about the disciples. The disciples are there. But this large crowd are those caught up in a Jesus frenzy.

Jesus' popularity was incredibly high. If you had a backache, Jesus would heal it. If you had a headache, Jesus would heal it. If you had heartache, Jesus would heal it. Jesus was the great physician who would heal all your problems and therefore Jesus was enormously popular to the crowds. Hordes of people were joining the Jesus bandwagon. Looking at the mass of would-be disciples, Jesus does it again, using hyperbole about commitment. "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." (Luke 14:26) What? Hold on. Hate father and mother? What about the fifth commandment to honor. Hate your family? Before we throw Jesus under the bus to Jerusalem it would be important to point out that "to hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from." There is nothing of that emotion we experience in the expression, "I hate you." <sup>2</sup>

Even so, for the crowd following, it would have been hard to swallow. "In the first century, far more than today, the family was one's fundamental source of self-identity. The family was your clan, your tribe, your people who determined who you were and how your life would be lived. Did you get to pick where you would live? No, your family did. Did you get to choose what you would do for a living? No, your family did. Did you get to choose who you would marry? No, your family did. In the first century, the family dictated everything about your identity. It was that very influence that Jesus calls his disciples to detach from, to reject, to hate. Jesus' harsh words shocked and shook up that crowd of would-be disciples. To experience the joy of following him, father, mother, husband, wife, family are secondary identities." <sup>3</sup>

It's why he adds "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) Following costs. There is a price to pay so Jesus tells two little stories about counting the costs. A man wanted to build a tall watchtower to guard against potential thieves. He started building but the project got out of hand; he ran out of money. He hadn't anticipated how much the building project would cost. How embarrassing; there's no joy in that. "Do you people get it?" No, they didn't get it.

Then Jesus said: There was a king who had ten thousand soldiers and he was planning to wage war against a king who had twenty thousand soldiers. The king had better figure out the cost of this war because ten thousand

soldiers lose to the twenty thousand every day of the week. There's no joy in that. He'd better seek a peace treaty. "Do you get it? Do you know what you are getting into? You need to calculate the cost in advance." What Jesus is saying, makes sense. You can't start building a home, and not have it fully financed. You can't go into a restaurant, order half the menu and not know if you can pay the bill. You can't drive up to the gas pump and put gas in your car without paying in advance. There is a cost for everything. They still don't get it. Jesus is saying "If you can't detach from family, can't bear the cross, can't cover the costs, then you get you won't experience joy. Joy is in direct relationship with commitment. Discipleship is all about joy.

There is the white space in your Bible after verse 33 which says, not many followed. And you can't blame them. It almost sounds as if Jesus is letting them off the hook. Count the costs if you must and if it is too great, then don't accept the invitation to the banquet, don't build the tower, don't go to war.

Is it okay to admit it? Is it okay to say that you don't want to come to the banquet because you are too busy with family or business? Is it okay to say I don't want any part in the suffering of bearing a cross? Is it okay I don't want to put anything in front of my family or my possession? Admit it; these are our questions, too.

Yes, it's okay, even honest, to admit that there is a lot eating away of our commitment to follow Jesus. But to respond that way, as we often do, we eventually end up lost in our own world. We end up building our own little towers and waging our own little wars. We end up in a dark and isolated place, where, like lost sheep, we risk spiritual death unless we are found and rescued. I don't know if that sounds too grim, or too melodramatic.<sup>4</sup> But I think this is exactly what Jesus is getting at telling us two back to back stories about counting the costs. The cost of not following Jesus, not coming to the banquet, not carrying the cross is the joy. There is only one way to experience joy and a relationship with God and it comes in being found in the self-centered worlds that we create.

Which is why Jesus tells a story immediately after these two about the cost of following. Maybe you've never connected it to the joy of following Jesus. It's about a shepherd who has 100 sheep. Realizing that one is lost, gone missing into his own world, the shepherd hunts him down. What happens? He hunts and hunts until "...he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices..."(Luke 15:5) Of course, he does. And he isn't the only one that rejoices. The lost sheep does too. Do you remember what it was like to be lost? Scared, alone, afraid that you would never be found? Then, you aren't—joy! I'm found. Jesus says the shepherd goes home and says, "Let's

party!" "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." And then, just so we understand God's desire for use this experience joy to encourage following, Jesus adds: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."(Luke 15:7)

God is so determined that we make it to the banquet, so wants us to experience the joy of following Jesus, that even when we offer apologies or back away from demands, God will send the Good Shepherd on a mission to find us in our lost world of excuses and self-interest.

In Jesus, God sent you a "save-the-date" invitation. The invitation is personal because it is about a date sometime in the future. It could be tonight, tomorrow or many years from now. You don't know; no one ever does. But God sent Jesus to give you a heads up that something exciting, memorable, joyful can happen at the end of your life. God wants you to save the date and you do so by saying yes to the invitation to follow Jesus.

Jesus saved a date too. That's why we are journeying to Jerusalem. Jesus saved the date, and for the sake of joy, endured the cross. He turning his saved date into a saving date, one for you and me.

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Fred. Interpretation: Luke. Page 179.

<sup>2</sup> Craddock, 181.

<sup>3</sup> Sweet, Leonard. Low Carb Christianity. Retrieved by subscription at sermons.com

<sup>4</sup> McKenzie, Alyce. How Not to Respond to an Evite. 9-1-13. Retrieved at <https://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/How-Not-Respond-Alyce-McKenzie-09-02-2013.html>