

One of my favorite historical figures is Abigail Adams. She was strong, intelligent, and wise. She was a loving and firm supporter of her dear husband, John Adams. In one of my favorite scenes of the movie/musical “1776”, Abigail sits next to her downtrodden husband in front of what would become the Liberty Bell. John is bemoaning the fact that the entire southern delegation has walked out of the debate regarding American independence because of the issue of slavery. Abigail tells him that he cannot give up, and in purest wife-ly style uses one of his own quotes to chide him.

“I remember what you said to me ‘Commitment, Abby, commitment.

There are only two creatures of value on the face of the earth: those with a commitment and those who require the commitment of others.”

Mr. and Mrs. Adams weren’t talking about a commitment to something trivial.

They were talking about something dangerous. On this side of the pond, we used the word independence. On the other side of the pond, the word was treason. To play this out, you had to bet your life on your convictions and commit your life to those convictions.

You risked not only your life, but the lives of your family and friends. However, there were those who needed that commitment. That made the choice, not necessarily easier, but more obvious.

A few weeks ago, men and women from around the world came together to compete in the Olympics. Most of them knew that they would not walk away with a medal around their neck. In fact, most of them didn't get out of the first heats or matches of competition. Yet, they made the commitment to train and to ready themselves for this event. They required the commitment of their entire families. For many, they required the commitment of corporate sponsorship or governmental support. They put not only their own talent on the line but national pride as well. It was not a commitment made lightly, for them or for those who loved them. They made it anyway, taking on the risks of injury or illness.

Today's gospel is about commitment. It sounds like Jesus wants you to hate everyone in your life. That's hyperbole. Jesus wants to get his point across so firmly that he will shock you into hearing his point.

Jesus is about to march into Jerusalem and he knows that's not going to end well.

He wants to make good and darn sure that his followers know what they are getting into before they get into it. He loves them that much.

Let's take a look at the community the author of Luke-Acts is addressing.

Luke's community knew the persecution of the Romans. The men and women hearing this for the first time understood the depth of the choice that they had made. One Christian in the family endangered the entire family – even if they weren't believers themselves. Jesus wasn't talking about hate and love as emotional states of being. He was using them as measures of prioritization.

Following Jesus was not something to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and deliberately, because being a disciple of Jesus was to put your life and your family's lives at risk. (1)

I immediately think about a church historical figure: Perpetua. She went to her deaths in the arena for her faith.

Perpetua's father begged her to recant, for he knew he would lose his standing in the community if she held fast to her convictions. She did not. We still mark the day of her martyrdom on March 7th each year.

Today, in Bethesda, Maryland, we are not hiding from soldiers. We come to worship in a beautiful sanctuary with fabulous music and ancient words and practice. There are places in this world, though, that are more like the people of Luke's day. There are places like the Sudan, or Somalia, or parts of the Middle East where Christians truly risk their lives to worship Christ. There, the decision isn't a matter of choosing between going to church and doing something else that's enjoyable. It is literally a matter of life and death. When I think about their discipleship, I'm confronted by how privileged I am to live here and how pathetic my faith seems in comparison.

To be a disciple of Jesus requires trust, because you really don't know where you are going to be called or what you will be called to become.

Discipleship requires study, because knowing the Christian story connects you to all who have gone before us and reminds us of their struggles.

But, most of all, discipleship requires commitment. This commitment has the potential to (and most assuredly will)

...change your life and your families' lives in ways you cannot comprehend,

...place you at odds with the political climate of the day, and

...make you unpopular with your peers.

However, if you have the courage, being a disciple of Christ also engages you and creates in you a force that can lead you through more than you could ever conceive. For like an Olympic athlete disciplines him or herself to train for their competition, the Christian's discipline trains him or her to walk through some of life's most difficult moments confident that they are loved more deeply than they can imagine and can weather those moments knowing they are not alone.

Many pastors spend a great deal of time praying about how to grow their churches. What programs do we need to offer?

How can we attract Millennials to show up more – or at all, or convince Generation Xr's to volunteer more, or get Baby Boomers to give more?

It's easy to get caught up in all of that. What I've come to understand through this gospel is that my priority as your rector is not to worry about the numbers so much as it is to help you become disciples of Jesus. I want to do that. I yearn to do that. Why? Because disciples of Jesus are attractive to people who are seeking a relationship with God. They share the Good News by the lives they lead and not just the words they say. They gently lead folks into community instead of threatening them with eternal flame. Disciples of Jesus love one another as Jesus loves us. That is the message disciples send to the world. Programs and study are all well and good, as long as they are committed to make all of us better disciples so that we go forth to love and to serve God and God's people.

So, my friends, I invite you to commit to being not only a member of a wonderful parish but also to becoming a disciple of Christ Jesus. It may be dangerous at times, but I promise we won't be bored! Amen.

(1) From "The Danger of Discipleship" by The Rev. Dr. David E. Leininger.

