



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, September 5, 2010**  
*The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Choral Eucharist*  
*at 11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin  
on  
Luke 14:25-33

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### *HUMAN LONGING*

Sometimes Jesus seems hard to understand, even though he's using ordinary words and talking about ordinary things; and the reason he's hard to understand is that he's getting at something that can't quite be put into words. He starts with something ordinary like building a tower. We get that; we live here in the midst of a lot of towers—skyscrapers!—and we know you'd better not start building one if you can't finish it. To leave a job unfinished makes the neighbors grumble unhappily (and there's nothing like the grumbling of unhappy New Yorkers).

It's ordinary advice, common sense: Don't start something you don't have the resources to finish. Take stock before you launch out. But the analogy, that's perplexing. Jesus, speaking to the multitudes who've come out, wants them to know they shouldn't start following him unless they've got what it takes to carry it through to the end. "Don't follow me unless you have the resources to do so"—seems to be the spiritual point.

But then he tells them, oddly, that if they want to follow him they have to abandon their resources. Don't start following me unless you hate your family. Don't start following me unless you hate your own life. Don't start following me unless you renounce everything you have.

In order to follow Jesus, it seems, we have to abandon our resources.

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I think Jesus is pointing to something here that has to be grasped by our heart and not by our mind. It might help to start close to home. New Yorkers know a lot about abandoning resources. While it may not have been true of you or me in particular, it is the case that many people came to this city precisely to get away from father and mother and even wife, children, brothers, and sisters—the list that Jesus gives in the gospel. In the ordinary run of things, family ties are strengths that people can draw on, "resources," and it can be difficult to live without the resources of those ties. Nonetheless, for many people there was something about this city that caused them to leave family resources behind in order to try to live here. New Yorkers make other sacrifices too: living in itsy-bitsy spaces, living squeezed up against lots of others. When I came back from the Southwest, I knew I was home when I felt the buildings

close in on each other. Something about living here is strangely attractive; and for whatever reason, thousands if not millions of people have been willing to shed resources in order to follow something they take to be more important than everything left behind.

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Let me say again that it seems to me Jesus is getting at something that has to be understood by the heart. Now it may be crazy to want to live in New York—but you know how it is: there's something deep in you, and you just have to follow it, no matter what the cost. That longing is a clue. And our eternal happiness may depend on our paying attention to that clue. Sad is the man who has never known this desire, who is supremely content with his life, his natural family ties, his goods. He puffs his cigar, he pats his belly, his dog rubs against his calf, and life seems perfectly good. He has natural happiness, and yes that is truly good in itself, but his life is one of blissful ignorance—numbness to the most important part of his soul.

*There is more to a human being than being human.* There is something in our soul that draws us beyond our soul. That is the most important discovery you will ever make: to find that you have an almost desperate longing and your longing will not be fulfilled by anything you have. This desire, this restlessness, it's built into us, and yet we can make mistakes about it. I think it's this deep desire that can cause us to sacrifice resources in order to come to New York, but it might lead one elsewhere: to conquer a mountain, or catch a ship to Carthage. Think how we build towers, fight wars, develop corporations, create operas, lay out highways; we form families, we break families, we bear children, we sacrifice children; we take drugs, we take chances, we take off. This "more" to human being than being human keeps driving us outward. It can be very costly, it may even take our life, but it is never satisfied.

Until Jesus comes into view. The multitudes saw in Jesus the answer to their longing, saw it, sensed it, wanted it. They'd wait for him to come. They'd chase after him. Sometimes he touched them, sometimes he healed them. But what he was always doing was teaching them what their longing was about and how it could be fulfilled.

And what he said was: If you really want to achieve your deepest desire, you will have to renounce everything else that you think of as necessary. You think family is necessary. You think concern for your own physical existence is necessary. You think money in the bank and a panoply of physical goods are necessary. You are wrong. "One thing is needful." That's what he said to Martha. "And don't think you can go just half way." That's what he says today.

It's a strange thing, being human. Rocks (as far as I can tell) are happy just to be rocks. Dogs are content with their dogness. But each one of us starts out unhappy, unfulfilled. Something planted in our nature wants more than our nature can give. Saint Augustine put it right near the top of his account of his wayward life. Our hearts are restless until they rest in God. All the other things we seek stem from this desire; none of the other things we seek satisfy. Not the bad, the evil, of course they don't satisfy, but neither do the pure and good things. Restless, restless the human heart: nothing satisfies, until Jesus, there he is, the beyond-human human. The human heart was built for Jesus.

May I speak to you personally and with frank directness? The most important thing in your whole life is for you to feel that restlessness inside you, there in your heart. If you get in touch with it, and follow it, there will be no going half way. It may cost you more than you would (in sober calculation) care to pay. But in the end Jesus will not leave you unsatisfied.