

“Costly Discipleship”
Luke 14:25-33
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 9, 2007

No one has ever got elected by proclaiming, “In order to retain the way of life that we Americans have come to expect, we’re going to have to raise taxes.” No one has ever made it into office by saying to voters, “If you want this world to survive into the next century, then you’re going to have to give up your SUV.” For an aspiring office seeker, that kind of talk would be rather foolish, right? Regardless of whether or not those two statements are valid, nobody I have ever heard of is going to offer either one of them. That would be nuts! Whether you’re a politician, an athletic director, or just about any other kind of public figure, you just don’t offer that kind of straight talk if you want to remain popular. So why then does Jesus offer it? Why does he turn to those who were so eager to follow him and say things like, *“You can’t be my disciple unless you hate your family...you can’t be my disciple unless you carry your cross...and you can’t be my disciple unless you give up everything that you have?”* Those are fairly stringent demands. Few, if any, are going to be able to meet them. So why offer them? As Dale Carnegie would say, saying things like that is not a very good way to win friends and influence a whole lot of people.

That, however, didn’t stop Jesus from doing so. Luke tells us that large crowds were following Jesus. That’s a good thing, right? Public figures usually like to have large crowds following them. And Jesus was a public figure. Now I do not doubt that there were a variety of motives present in that crowd. I do not doubt that some were seeking a sense of God’s presence in a very difficult world, some were looking for forgiveness from some past mistake, some needed healing of body and spirit, some hoped for a good youth program, some sought an inspiring preacher or an awesome choir that could help to get their week off to a good start, some wanted a tax write-off, and some probably thought the crowd might be a good place to make a business connection or hook up with a hot date. Oh, there were many different people in that large crowd. And yes, they found their way into that crowd for a variety of reasons. But the bottom line seems to be that

they were there, and they were following Jesus. Once again, that's a good thing, right? Especially if you're on a mission to save the world from itself, right? So why in the world would he turn to that crowd and say something like:

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even life itself—such a person cannot be my disciple.”

Now I do not know about you, but those words trouble me a lot. Hate my family? Oh, my mom can sometimes treat me like I'm still 12, but I don't hate her. My sons can do things that get me pretty upset at times, but I don't hate them. Ella has now watched “High School Musical 2” a bazillion times, but I don't hate her. And I don't hate Jesus! As a matter of fact, I love him and try my best to follow him. So why does he tell the crowd, and by inference tell me, that in order to follow him I have to hate my family? Does that trouble you as much as it does me? Here we have a Savior who wants us to love our neighbors, our enemies, and even ourselves, but then tells us that we can't love our own families? And after that he goes on to say:

“And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

I've done enough reading to know that the concept of “bearing the cross” has been a bit misused of late. We usually hear it as part of the phrase, “Well, I guess that is just my cross to bear.” And the person who uses the concept in that way is usually talking about a crazy relative, a bad case of dandruff, or a boss who tends to hit the sauce a little too early in the afternoon. Am I wrong? We misuse that concept way too much. We all know what Jesus meant. When Jesus talked about “bearing the cross,” he was literally talking about “bearing the cross.” He was talking about dying by crucifixion, most of the time symbolically, but there were times that he really meant it. Just ask Peter. Those to whom he first addressed those words knew the gruesome nature of crucifixion first hand. The Romans used that form of punishment quite frequently and very publicly. It was a terrible way to die. Not once did those early Christians ever associate that phrase with an overbearing mother-in-law, bless her heart, or a knee that begins to throb when it rains.

So why would they follow someone who demanded something like that? And why would they follow someone who followed up those words with these:

“Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

Here Jesus tells them that if they want to follow him they have to give up all of their possessions. Now. He does not even make room for a quick garage sale here. Nothing for all those hard years of labor. Nothing put away for a rainy day. Just put it all down and walk away from it, just like John and James did with their nets, just like Matthew did with his tax table, just like Paul did with his former way of life. As I have been saying, Jesus had a crowd ready to follow him, but then turned around and offered these very difficult conditions for doing so. Who is going to follow him after all of that? As I said, I have always had trouble with this particular passage. I have never known what to do with it. What are you going to do with it? Are you ready to hate your family, pick up the cross, and walk away from everything that makes you you? If not, then why in the world are you here this morning?

Well, I don't know if this will help, but I could tell you that when Jesus tells us to hate our family, it is really not what we think. We are dealing here with a concept that really doesn't translate into English very well. The word we translate as “hate” is an ancient Semitic expression meaning “to turn away or detach oneself from.” It is not the animosity-laden word we think about today, not like the classic Yankees/Red Sox, Sooners/Longhorn, or Duke/North Carolina kind of hate. It is sort of like saying that a kid loves ice cream but hates green beans. The kid doesn't actually hate green beans, it is just that if a plate of green beans and a bowl of ice cream are placed in front of him, more than likely he or she is going to turn from the green beans and turn to the ice cream. What we usually mean when we say that is the ice cream is preferred over the green beans. Now we find a little bit of that kind of thinking in the Bible. The book of Genesis tells us that Jacob was married to two sisters: Rachel and Leah. We are told that Rachel was quite a striking young woman, while Leah had “weak eyes,” sort of the Bible's way of saying, “Yeah, but she had a great personality.” We are also told in one verse that Jacob loved

Rachel more than Leah, while in the very next verse it literally says that Leah was hated. Again, Leah was not hated in the sense we usually use the word, it is just that Jacob loved her less than Rachel. One author summed it up nicely when he wrote that Jacob couldn't have hated her all that much, since he did have seven children with her. There was something there he liked! In the way that it is used in this morning's lesson, the word hate simply contrasts two options: the love of family and the love of Jesus. It is a choice between the better and the best, if you will, a decision about how you will prioritize your life. And in light of the next demand that Jesus put on those who tried to follow, that makes perfect sense.

Luke tells us a few chapters earlier, you see, that Jesus had "set his face to Jerusalem." In other words, he was intent on taking the good news of the gospel to the spiritual center of the Jewish people. Now you don't have to be the Son of God to figure out that his decision to do so would not be easy. He had already had several run-ins with some of the scribes and Pharisees—the religious leaders of the day. To travel to the very heart of the faith and the center of politics, and confront both of them with a message that could be construed as challenging the sacred and secular powers of the land, well, you better not only have your priorities in order, but you better be prepared to pay the consequences as well. That's the whole point behind those two short parables about the man who wanted to build the tower and the king who was thinking about going to war. The decisions you make will have consequences; so you better think them through before they're made. I think that it is important to note here that when it comes to picking up the cross, we usually think of Simon of Cyrene. You remember him. On that day we call Good Friday, while on the way to Golgotha, when Jesus was too weak to go on, Simon carried the cross for him. It is a beautiful act to ponder, but there is a big difference between Simon and those to whom Jesus spoke. Simon was compelled to carry the cross. That sharp Roman sword left him no choice. It was literally do or die. Those who followed Jesus, however, had a choice. Were they ready to follow Jesus? Were they willing to die for what he believed? What about you? Jesus wanted that crowd to know, Jesus wants us to know, that the cost of following was and is quite high. And if you're not willing to pay it, then how can you be his disciple?

But if you are, then the last demand makes even more sense and is really quite simple. Once the decision is made that you are going to follow Jesus, once you realize that there is nothing more important in life than becoming his disciple, then give up everything else, as you're really not going to need it any longer. Everything else pales in comparison to being a disciple. Following Jesus is a full time, life-changing commitment, you see. So lay it down, walk away from it, and follow him. Don't look back. Keep your eyes focused on the Master. Then and only then, after all of those very hard decisions have been made, will Jesus be able to consider you to be one of his true followers.

So are you one of his true followers? Have you met all of his demands and decided to follow Jesus? Even with these three explanations a bit more understandable, the bar is still set pretty high, isn't it? Ordering your priorities, understanding the consequences of your decision, and walking away from anything that holds you back is still going to be nearly impossible. As a matter of fact it is so impossible, that it turns out that even Mother Teresa had trouble doing so. If someone as sainted as her had trouble following, then how in the world can the rest of us be expected to do so? Who in the world can be a disciple? Based on these preconditions, I'll be the first to admit that I sure can't. Can you? We have come to the point where it appears that there is absolutely no way that any of us can follow Jesus. Despite our best intentions and our finest efforts, the demands are just too great. So where do we go from here?

Well, let's rethink what Jesus had to say in this passage. Three times he told the crowd that if they were unable to meet a particular demand, then they could not be his disciples. I read a commentary last week that offered an idea I never had thought about. Whether you are reading the Bible or the latest Harry Potter novel, it seems that there has always been a couple of ways to think about people who are unable to do something. Either they can do it and choose not to do so or, for whatever reason, it is simply impossible for them to do it. Either they won't do whatever it is they are called upon to do or they simply can't. Now Luke seems to describe both kinds of people in his gospel. For instance, he records Jesus' parable about the fellow who heard his neighbor pounding

on the door at midnight and asking for a loaf of bread, but who was unable to get up and help. It was not because that fellow couldn't walk to the door or didn't have an extra loaf of bread in the cupboard, but because it was late at night and if he got up to help he was going to wake up everybody in the house. In other words, that fellow was unable to help because he chose not to do so. Now Luke also records the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to Zechariah, the soon-to-be-father of John the Baptist. When he refused to believe the angel's words, when he was unwilling to accept the fact that two old coots like he and his wife could actually get pregnant and have a baby, Gabriel zapped him and he was suddenly unable to speak. He was unable to speak not because he chose to be silent, but because it was physically impossible for him to say a word. So in his gospel, Luke used the phrase "unable to" in two different ways. So which one does Luke use in today's passage?

I think we can find a clue in another of Luke's stories, one that I plan on telling you a few months from now. It is the story of the visit the angel Gabriel made after he zapped old Zechariah. You may remember that the angel went to a young girl who lived in the city of Nazareth. Gabriel told her that she would soon conceive and bear a son. That young girl replied by asking a very pertinent question, "How can this be, as I have not yet been with a man?" You may remember that Gabriel replied by telling her that, "*nothing will be impossible with God.*" Then several chapters later, Luke tells another story, this one of a rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking what he must do to inherit eternal life. Just like in today's story, Jesus offered some very difficult demands and, upon hearing them, the man walked away realizing that there was absolutely no way that he could ever meet them. When the disciples saw what happened, they asked Jesus, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus replied by saying, "*What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.*" I think this is the way Luke wanted us to understand these very difficult words that Jesus offered to that crowd. There is simply no way that they could ever meet the demands that Jesus placed upon them. It was not that they chose not to follow; it is just that there was not any way they could. It was virtually impossible for them to do so. The ordering of priorities, the understanding of the consequences of decisions not yet made, and the walking away from everything that gave life meaning and

purpose—there was just no way that anyone in that crowd was ever going to be able to do those things no matter how hard they tried. And there is no way for those of us in this crowd to do those things as well.

Yet as discouraging as all of that may sound, even though the demands of discipleship have been set very high, Luke seems to say that there is still hope—hope for those in that crowd and hope for those in this crowd. And that hope is based upon Luke’s understanding that with God nothing will be impossible. As a matter of fact, the only way that anyone has ever been able to follow Jesus was to recognize what an impossible task it actually is. Only when we recognize that there is absolutely no way that it can be done do things begin to change. And that is because, as one has so wisely written, “When we confess, “I can’t,” then we are open for God’s “I can.”¹

My sisters and my brothers, it is my fervent prayer that you soon learn the joy of shouting, “I can’t!”

¹ Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes, www.crossmarks.com