

Sermon-9/5/10
“Another Set of Hard Sayings”
Luke 14:25-33

“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. . .Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . .So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Apparently Jesus did not read church growth manuals! Here he has this huge crowd following him, itching to be his disciples and he gives them tasks that seem incredibly harsh or impossible. What are we to do with them? What do we tell our children? When Janet asked me what I was preaching on so she could organize a children’s homily in her absence, I told her whoever did the homily could just tell the kids they needed to hate their parents and brothers and sisters!

Obviously I was speaking tongue in cheek when I said that, but it does get at the difficulty of explaining these sayings of Jesus, even to adults. The modern Church tends to go in a very different direction when it comes to attracting new members. We emphasize how easy it is. We say, look, it only means coming to four classes and you can skip one or two if you can’t make them all. We seldom encourage folks to count the cost before choosing to become members.

I am as guilty as any pastor in this. Even when we recruit folks to serve as an elder, deacon or on a committee, I tend to downplay the commitment. It won’t disrupt much of your life. There is only one meeting a month and a little work on the side. It’s not that big of a deal. Jesus seems to do the exact opposite.

Is Jesus trying to discourage people from being his disciples? Even if one blunts some of the harshness of these requirements, they are still tough. When Matthew quotes Jesus here, he changes the wording. Instead of hating family members, Matthew has Jesus say, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”

While that feels better than the word “hate,” and it probably gets at the true meaning of what Jesus said (he obviously does not want us to literally hate our family members), it is still daunting to follow that advice.

If we are honest, and I include myself in this, convenience and family commitments are a far bigger concern than the costly demands of being a faithful disciple of Jesus. What if being faithful would cause some inconvenience for our families or us? Would that affect what we would choose to do? Does our faith really call us to make such a choice these days?

Taking up one’s cross is equally tough. Jesus is not just saying we need to put up with life’s inconveniences and call that taking up our cross. Scholars say Jesus is saying if being his disciple means giving up even our lives, we need to be ready to do that.

Most of us find that very difficult. We ask our soldiers to be willing to give up their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan in the cause of fighting terrorists. We can't help but admire their commitment and courage. But would we be willing to do that for our faith, and not just our country?

The command to give up our possessions if we want to follow Jesus is perplexing at best. Jesus can't possibly mean that literally. Certainly he does not want us to be paupers, wards of the state, in order to be his disciple.

So what do we do? Do we just ignore these sayings or give up? Herb O'Driscoll says these commands by Jesus were intended to be read as a radical ideal. One can be a Christian disciple without going that far. In fact, if you were to look at the whole Church, Christians are all over the spectrum in terms to how far they have gone in living up to this ideal. The ideal is helpful because it gives us a direction in terms of discipleship. It gives us a standard to judge how well we are growing in our faith commitments.

Certainly Jesus' sayings here cause us to ask ourselves about what commitments define our lives. We might even want to ask ourselves what cost have we paid in trying to live into the most important commitments we have made?

Most married couples know about the cost of committing to another person in good times and in bad. Marriage has many wonderful rewards, but there is a cost to be paid if any marriage is to last and thrive. Certainly any parent knows the cost of parenting well. Most professions require some cost to be paid if we are to be successful. What about the cost of being a disciple? What would that look like in a country that calls itself a Christian nation?

I came across a helpful article on this passage in Luke. The author says John Calvin, the founder of what we have come to call Presbyterianism, had a very inspiring take on Jesus' words in Luke 14. "For Calvin, the Christian life should be understood from four implications of Jesus' teaching: (1) self-denial, (2) cross bearing, (3) meditation on eternal life, and (4) the proper use of the gifts of God in daily life." The article fleshes out what this means.

For Calvin self-denial "is the way Jesus offers us freedom from selfishness." When we can deny ourselves in this perspective we are free to love God and neighbor in healthy ways. Our most important relationships are not all about meeting our needs. To recognize our deep-seated selfishness and to give it up is to find true freedom in our relationships. Most of us, if we looked deeply, would recognize that selfishness colors even our most intimate relationships. It costs us something to not only recognize it, but to give it up.

Cross bearing, for Calvin, is a "dimension of self-denial that enables us to face suffering." Especially when our suffering is caused by our commitment to God's justice, if we face that suffering honestly acknowledging our hurt, we can be free from bitterness. Most of us have seen someone we respect suffer without bitterness. We have read about others who have given their life for a great cause. That kind of cross bearing changes the world.

When Calvin talks about meditating on eternal life he means for us to contemplate the mystery and cherish the wonder of Jesus' resurrection and the hope that gives the rest of us. When we can

trust God in life and in death, when we can face our own death with authenticity and grace, we stop holding on to life and our material possessions with such a death grip. It is not morbid to contemplate our own deaths. It can help us see what a gift each day is. When death is not feared, life opens up.

Finally Calvin talks about the proper use of the gifts of God in daily life. Calvin believes this world is finally not our home. We are on a pilgrimage to our true home. We are to live simply as we make this spiritual journey home. Basically Calvin wants us to live a balanced life that is not too ascetic or too indulgent, one where we are good stewards of God's good gifts.

The author concludes his article by saying, "The housing and economic crises; the damage to the earth by the burning of fossil fuels; and the hunger, poverty, and pandemics suffered by people in all parts of the world are certainly calling us in the church to give Jesus' call to costly discipleship a new lease on life."

Another commentator put it this way. To follow Jesus is to disentangle "ourselves from everything else that seeks to own or define us. It means admitting that we may have made false gods out of our attachments; it invites us to let go."

Jesus' words are challenging, to be sure. But they offer us a radical freedom that will help us live with more integrity, love with less selfishness, and face death with less fear. Costly? Absolutely. But what good thing in life isn't costly? Amen