

Sermon: September 4, 2022

“Discipleship”

Text: Luke 14:25-33

Prayer: God of wisdom, here and now, open our hearts and minds to understand this difficult passage before us. We ask for your guidance. Amen.

So, who among you here wants to be a disciple of Jesus? Can I see your hands please? Great! Here's what you have to do if you want to be a disciple. This is according to the text in Luke: 1- hate your family, 2- hate your own life, 3- carry your cross and 4-give up your possessions. Now do you still want to be a disciple? Following Jesus, according to Luke, is costly and expensive. Any takers? Jesus' words in this passage don't just sound black and white. They are black and white. It is all or nothing. We are either in or out. I don't get this, do you? Did Jesus really say these words? Surely Jesus doesn't want this passage to be taken literally. There must be some contextual issues in the first century world in order to understand this difficult text. If these 4 requirements shaped Jesus' own life and ministry, what do they mean for us today?

This passage troubled me to some extent that I went back to the original Greek word for hate, which is “miseo”. The word hate or miseo, according to Luke, comes from a Semitic expression meaning, “to love less, to turn away from or detach oneself from.” It means giving up the relationships you have, the life that you enjoy, the things that give you comfort. Jesus is warning the crowds that following him means that they have to switch their priorities. It means giving up the people they love and detaching themselves from the life they have known. They must carry their own crosses which will likely die for the truth. Jesus is warning the crowds of what is to come by following him. Are you kidding us, Jesus? Is this for real?

To hate one's own family - what does Jesus mean by this? In the first century, the family unit was central in the life of an individual, so the implications and challenge of Jesus' words are significant. According to Luke, Jesus seeks loyal people, undistracted by the cares of daily life. Jesus knows well that some family members would certainly disapprove of his instructions, since it involves a commitment that may detract from a person's familial responsibilities in order to follow him. Scholar Robert Tannehill explains that in the ancient world, hating one's family also meant doing something that injured them, particularly by disgracing them. Every family member was expected to protect the honour of the family. If some members joined a suspect movement and abandoned their homes, this

would have brought disgrace to the family. This would have been a real concern, particularly at the time Luke was writing. Division within families quite often accompanies the birth of new social or religious movements. Letters survive to this day of some Roman families who complained that their son or daughter had run off and joined some group called The Way, which is a term to denote "Christians or followers of Jesus in the first century." No doubt some felt dishonoured by a family member's participation in the Jesus movement. Giving up one's family in the context of Luke can be rephrased like this: "When your loyalty to Jesus conflicts with your loyalty to any other person, even a family member, you must choose Jesus!"

The word "hate" is laden with negative emotions in our cultural context. It suggests animosity and repulsion. In the context of first century middle-eastern culture, however, to "hate" one's life means that the person disconnects from everything that has defined that person. Religion, politics, social status, family, wealth. To put it another way, one's past no longer defines who one is. One's identity is no longer formed by one's former allegiances, or one's experiences in life, or even one's family connections. A fisherman, a tax collector, a physician, a tentmaker – all were called by Jesus and they abandoned their careers, their families, their old selves. Followers of Jesus are no longer defined by the past, but by their commitment to follow Jesus' way in the present and their future hope.

As if giving up one's family and losing oneself weren't enough, Jesus strikes with another requirement: "Whoever does not carry their cross and come after me is not able to be my disciple." Followers of Jesus live with the expectation that they may meet the same fate as Jesus. He said at one time: "You must be willing to follow me, even to death, if that's what it takes!" What does carrying one's cross mean to you? It means a lot of things. It could mean carrying the burdens of those who are not able to do so. It could mean carrying on the ministry of Jesus forward by serving and loving those whom the world ignores. It could mean favouring and regarding the marginalized, even when that action might lead to your own oppression. If the cross is only a means of your salvation, then you've missed Jesus' point. Following Jesus means dying to oneself. Not just everything you have, but everything you are. Karolyn Lewis offers this wonderful explanation: *"When it's all about cost, it's all about what you give up. What you sacrifice. What you deny. The cross is not unique but representative of what life is. To carry your cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment -- a commitment to a way of life that is committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now. That's certainly what it meant to Jesus."*

How do we address Jesus' directive about possessions? This is a tough one which most of us would likely have difficulty giving up. What are possessions? Is this just my stuff – my house, my car, my land, my wealth? Or, do my possessions include more intangible things to which I cling - ideas, prejudices, opinions, the filters through which I see the world? Are my relational obligations my possessions? And does my family possess me – body, heart and soul? The Lukan Jesus warns the crowd: "When your attachment to possessions is stronger than your attachment to me, you must be willing to give up your possessions!" Jesus only means one thing: undivided loyalty, which can lead to a change of heart, a transformed priority, a wiser choice.

Hate your family, abandon your own life, carry your cross, give up your possessions. These words are harsh. They are costly. They are expensive. No wonder Jesus compares becoming disciples to buildings and battles. Who wastes time, effort and resources on a building project, before knowing whether funds will be available to complete the project? Jesus reminds us to count the cost before going "all in". If you were going to build a tower, you'd do that. If you were going to war, you'd do that. If you are going to buy a new suit, start a new business, write a new book, or start a family—be mindful of the cost before you jump in. Being a Christian church in the western world may be challenging at times. Decline in membership, scarce financial resources or unresolved conflicts may bring us worries from time to time. But, in many places in this world, being a follower of Jesus comes with vicious costs. Take, for example, the Christian Churches in Egypt which are being burned and bombed. Some clergy in the Philippines have been abducted and murdered because they outspokenly support those whose human rights were violated. This is why our faith's symbol isn't the smiley-face, but the cross.

A concerned father called the former Methodist Bishop William Willimon one day, very upset, and said, "I hold you personally responsible for this!" It turns out his daughter was going to—in his words—"throw it all away" to go do mission work in Haiti with the Presbyterian Church: "A Mechanical Engineering degree from Duke, and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti!" As the conversation went on, Willimon pointed out that it was actually the parents who had started all of this. They were the ones who had her baptized, who read Bible stories to her, who took her to Sunday School. "You're the ones who introduced her to Jesus, not me," Willimon replied. And the father said, "But all we ever wanted her to be was a Methodist." Willimon countered, "your daughter heeded the call of Jesus. You must be proud of her".

If we take Luke's words and apply them in today's world and context, this is what I understand. Following Jesus is a way of life that demands a change of heart. Think about some of the implications

of following his way. It means moving out of our comfort zones. It means we have to think, talk and act like Jesus regardless of where we are, who we are with, or what we are doing. It means politics is no longer governed by party agendas or loyalty but by commitment to Jesus' agenda: to promote love, justice, well-being, compassion, kindness, inclusion. It means to treat your family as neighbours that you truly would love. It means the earth and all creation are not commodities to be used, abused, misused, polluted, and stripped, but a sacred gift entrusted to our care. It means enjoying the possessions we have with a commitment to share with those who are in need. Here's the clincher: We can't do these things alone. Even though we may want to follow Jesus, to be willing to give up everything, it is virtually impossible to do so. Instead of giving up and saying the cost is too high or discipleship is impossible and therefore irrelevant, why not remind yourself that it is the grace and love of God that enables us to keep on going, to keep on trying, and to keep on believing. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it beautifully: "The call to discipleship is a gift of grace and that call is inseparable from grace."

There's a reason why biblical scholars call today's text one of Jesus' "difficult teachings." They are words that challenge and disturb us. Isn't that why we have come here today? We want to be challenged. We want to be disturbed. We want to be moved. We want to be fully alive. We want to be real and authentic. We want to live in the footsteps of Jesus. Don't let the text scare you away. We can do this. Jesus is not asking you and me to give up everything. That is so hard to do. Jesus wants us to make life-giving choices as we follow his teachings and put them into practice.

As you leave the service today, ask yourself what is one thing that you could do or give up that will change your priorities, reorder your relationships, and make you commit to following the teachings of Jesus? Live that and be a different person starting today. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Source that helped me: The sermons, writings and commentaries of Rick Morley, Karolyn Lewis, David Lose, Rev. Dawn, Peter Lockhart, Will Willimon and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.