

Sermon: September 8, 2019

“Who Wants to Be a Disciple?”

Text: Luke 14:25-33

So, who among you here wants to be a disciple of Jesus? Can I see hands please? Great! Here's what you have to do if you want to be a disciple. This is according to Jesus in the gospel of 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 give up the people they love and detach themselves from the life they have known. They must be willing to take the risks of carrying their own crosses which is likely dying for truth. Jesus is warning the crowds of what is to come by following him. Are you kidding us Jesus?

To hate one's own family - what does Jesus mean by this? In the first century, the family unit is central in the life of an individual so the implications of and challenge of Jesus' words are significant. According to Luke, Jesus seeks allegiant persons, undistracted by the cares of daily life. He 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 home, this brought disgrace on 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 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 emotion 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 they are. 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 self. Followers of Jesus are not defined by the past, but by their work in the present and their future hope.

As if giving up one's family and losing yourself weren't enough, Jesus follows with another requirement: "Whoever does not bear 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 will 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 the cross mean to you? Carrying one's cross means a lot of things. It could mean to carry the burdens of those who are not able to do so. It could mean to carry 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 for your salvation, then you've missed Jesus' point. Following Jesus means dying to self. 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 for Jesus."

How do we address Jesus' directive about possessions? This is a tough one which most of us would be difficult giving up. What are possessions? Are these 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 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, hate your own life, carry your cross, give up your possessions. These words are harsh. It is costly. It is 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 were 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 protestant pastors 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 from our comfort zones. It means we are 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 neighbour 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 to enjoy 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 ourselves 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. Bonhoeffer says it beautifully: "The call to discipleship is a gift of grace and that call is inseparable from grace."

There's a reason biblical scholars call today's gospel one of Jesus' "difficult sayings." They are, words that challenge and disturb us. Isn't that why we showed up 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 I 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 to 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, reorders your relationships, and makes 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.