

Grace and Discipleship: The Full Cost

That's some gospel passage. I looked around for a nearby saint's day we could celebrate today instead so I could switch the readings for the day, but I came up empty. It's a slow time of year for saints apparently. So it appears we're stuck with hating your family and selling all your possessions in order to be Jesus' disciple.

It seems like every time Jesus gathers to himself a good crowd of followers he says something like this to thin their ranks. Every time too many people respond to a healing and follow him because they too hope to be healed, every time too many listen to a profound teaching about being welcome at the banquet of God or fed with the bread from heaven, every time they see some outcast leper be touched by Jesus and begin to believe that they too are loveable and gather around him, Jesus seems to do his best to drive them away by raising the stakes a bit. This guy clearly never went to a church growth seminar or sat through a lecture on marketing your message.

This is the other side of the coin with Jesus. Grace is free, but discipleship is costly. Everyone can come and be fed, but if you want to stick around and really follow Jesus it will be a difficult road. All are welcome into the household of God, but if you look around, we are a long way from the kingdom of heaven and it will take a lot of work to build that house here. That is the reminder of Jesus when we get a little too comfortable in following him. You will always be offered grace when you need it, but there is much work to be done and it will require some sacrifices as well.

This is what the great German ethicist Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Cost of Discipleship in his famous book by that title. He looked around himself in Germany in the 1930s and he saw the rise of the Nazi party and the complacency of his beloved church in his predominantly Christian country. It wasn't that people didn't know the teachings of Jesus. It was that they preferred not to rock the boat, not to offend those who were saying things that were opposed to the gospel, especially if they were family and friends, not to do anything that might cost them, might cause them suffering. He called their religion one of "cheap grace." He said, "cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate" among us. Bonhoeffer was explaining that Jesus is saying the same thing to the church in every generation that he said to those initial followers. To be his disciple, to follow him, means to give up other paths, other idols that we follow. He told the church that to follow Jesus would be costly, it may cost them some relationships, some ease of life, some possessions, but that the vision that God has for this world could not be realized without such sacrifices.

That is really what Jesus is saying here. He is being hyperbolic when he says you must hate your father and mother. Overstatement is one of Jesus' favorite rhetorical devices. But he does mean you can't want to please them more than you want to proclaim the gospel. It means this: sometimes you need to be willing to say to your family things like, "I know you think that but it's really just racist and hateful and it's not okay. Jesus called us to more in life than playing to our most base impulses." Sometimes you have to say in the midst of a group of friends, that

joke isn't funny, it's hurtful. It means sometimes saying, "I am not going to raise my children that way, because I have a different set of values." It means that your fidelity to the truth of the gospel comes before family bonds because relationships can grow and change but truth is not negotiable.

Bearing your cross as you follow Jesus has been used so many times to placate people in their suffering, or to hold them in a terrible circumstance as though it would have some positive benefit. But that is not what the admonition here is for. It isn't a permanent state, and it does have a purpose. Jesus did not carry his cross alone, and he did not hang there indefinitely. You do not have to do either of those things either. At the end of Jesus bearing his cross there was resurrected life. No one can tell you what your cross is, but it should be something that is on the way to new life; otherwise you are not following the way of Jesus, and not telling a Christian story. For instance, the only way to sobriety is through the twelve steps, and they're not easy, but they do lead to new life. Maybe your cross is seeking forgiveness, maybe it is stepping out in faith from your comfortable place to do something you feel called to, or maybe your cross to bear at the moment is the humility to ask for help because the weight of life is too much to carry alone. None of those things are easy, but all of them lead to life, and all of them can be part of following Christ.

Finally Jesus tells them to give up all of their possessions to follow him. I think this strikes many people as the most outrageous of his exhortations. And that tells us everything we need to know about why he is saying it. We like our possessions. We let them define us. We might define ourselves by any number of our possessions before we thought to define ourselves by our identity as followers of Christ. That is why Jesus is saying we have to let them go, stop being possessed by them, defined by them, and instead find our identity in our relationship to him alone, as a disciple of Christ. In that same book Bonhoeffer tells his readers, "Earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety." They are ephemeral, and so is any identity based on them. Only a personal story that finds its meaning in the far side of the cross and resurrection of Jesus will have any ultimate purpose. Only that will survive when all else has fallen to dust and ash. If you are holding too tightly to things that are literally in the process of perishing, you can't tell the story of eternity with conviction and integrity. These are the things that Jesus is telling us.

And he is trying to be honest about it. No one should take up this path without considering the cost because following Jesus is costly. It's not all banquets and miraculous healings. He asks a lot sometimes. But weigh the outcomes he says. Can you afford to live in a way that does not produce life? Come for the banquet, come for the healing, come to be embraced by a love that overlooks all of your worst character flaws, but if you want to stick around, be ready to follow Jesus on a difficult path to do hard work that needs to be done for his vision of the world to be realized.

That is what Jesus is constantly telling the people who gather around him, and then he inevitably loses a bunch of them, and goes out to gather up more, because it takes both parts of the story grace and discipleship to produce meaning. The other side of the coin is always right there. Striving and falling short and forgiveness. Rest and complacency and exhortation to strive again. It is a never ending cycle. But that cycle is how we grow as Christians, and how the kingdom grows here on earth.

It is the same choice that Moses had given his people. Choose the path that leads to life, even if it leads through struggle. On this Labor Day weekend we are thinking about resting, and that's good, but remember that in the path of Jesus, that grace is the respite that prepares us to follow on the next leg of the journey of discipleship. May we all hear the full version of his call, and still be counted among his followers. Amen.