

## ***Counting the Cost of Discipleship***

In the name of him who has called us to take up a cross and follow him, dear friends in Christ: You may have noticed that in the Gospel lessons for the past couple of weeks, Jesus has been effectively thinning the crowds that have been flocking around him by making increasingly more forceful statements about what it means to really follow him and to be his true disciples. He keeps saying things that are startling for us to hear and even more difficult to accept. Sometimes he gets down right offensive. He seems bent on shaking us up. Worse, he refuses to speak in vague generalities about the *people* who follow him; instead, he always turns the discussion to *you*. “I’m talking to *you*”, he says, “Where do *you* stand? Are *you* with me or not?” It’s always direct confrontation. He leaves you no room to squirm away, or to pretend that you’re standing beside him saying, “Yeah, you tell’m Jesus.” No, when he speaks it’s always very personal and provocative.

And today we get an even stronger dose of it. We find ourselves in the crowds merrily following Jesus down the road. We feel pretty comfortable in our relationship with him. And we’re marching along behind him thinking we’re doing an adequate job of being his disciples, quite confident that we will be with him from now until the time his kingdom of glory comes, when suddenly, for no apparent reason, he unexpectedly whirls around and fires these hard words at us: “*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother, and sisters—yes, even his own soul—he cannot be my disciple.*”

And so we stand here slack jawed and flabbergasted, staring blankly at each other and thinking, “Where’d that come from? What does he mean by that? Aren’t we supposed to honor our parents? Love all people? Especially aren’t we to care for the members of our own household? What does he mean that we have to hate these people in order to be his disciple?”

We’re not left wondering. The comments that follow make it clear that he’s talking about the cost of discipleship and our level of commitment to him. And so we understand that when Jesus says we must *hate* father, mother, spouse, child, and so on, he means that no human relationship can take precedence over your relationship with him. You cannot allow any other person to occupy a greater place in your heart. No one can stand in-between him and you as you follow him on the path of life. And if you are ever forced to choose between Jesus and someone else, then it must be, “Sorry Dad, sorry Mom, sorry my dear, my kids, or whoever you are: Jesus comes first in my life.” And stated that way, it seems obvious to us. He is, after all, our Lord God and Savior – so this is basic first commandment stuff: “You shall have no gods before me.” But we’re left wondering why he didn’t just say that. Why did he say it in a way that is so offensive and that might be misunderstood?

And I suppose the reason is that even though it should be “obvious first commandment stuff” to us, it’s not. We need to be shocked into seeing that very often we *do* place our human relationships above our relationship with Jesus. And a couple of examples may help here. Take, for instance, the very common case of a person who claims to believe the basic tenants of the Christian faith, but who won’t convert because of the effect it will have (or rather that they imagine it *might* have) on their parents or other family members. Evangelists working within the Jewish community will tell you this is probably the biggest obstacle they face. Even among the most secular Jews – people who have never stepped into a synagogue and who know nothing and care even less about the Jewish religion – most parents would literally disown their adult children if they were to become Christians. And too many of these people do not convert for that reason.

Things can be even worse for those who convert from the Muslim faith. Though not so great a threat in this country, I met a fellow at Seminary who cannot return to his home country in Africa because his own brothers have taken an oath to kill him for becoming a Christian. His father had four wives and over fifty children – so it’s a bigger threat than you might think. And that’s standard procedure in many Muslim countries: for your own family to issue a death warrant for anyone who leaves the Islamic faith. Makes you wonder how many potential followers of Jesus *don’t follow* in order to keep peace in the family (and perhaps stay alive too!).

And this obstacle does not exist just for would-be converts from Islam or Judaism. I've seen it used as the major excuse not to follow Jesus by people who grew up in families that were atheist or agnostic, and even by some who were raised another branch of Christendom. I've met people who think they're better off being a *non-practicing* Catholic, Presbyterian, Methodist ... *whatever*, rather than say a practicing Lutheran – even though they agree with the tenants of Lutheran theology. It's just that they're afraid of what their folks will do if they make the switch. Better *not* to follow at all than to follow in a way the family might disapprove of.

And we could find plenty of other examples of how people allow human relationships to stand in the way of following Jesus. Like the young adult who stands here before the altar on confirmation day and swears to suffer all, even death, rather than depart from the Christian faith ... and who a few years later calls home to tell the folks they've met someone special ... and no, this person isn't a Christian exactly ... "but how important is that? I mean, we're in love! Isn't that all that really matters?" Unfortunately, usually at that point the answer is, "yes, that's all that matters" – because the person is convinced that their best chances for happiness lies in a human relationship rather than in Christ. Or again, another notable example is the large number of would-be disciples who are unable to follow Jesus into the sometimes necessary area of church discipline because to them family bonds are more important than faithfully following Christ.

The problem with these and many other half-hearted approaches to discipleship is that there is no real commitment to Christ. He's left taking second place (at best) to someone else in our hearts. And he refuses to do it. That's why he says, if you place someone in front of me, you "cannot be my disciple".

The real issue here is *trust*. Being a disciple of Jesus means first and foremost that you trust *him*. You need to trust him with your own life. He makes it clear to us that the path of discipleship is going to lead to sacrifices, difficulties, and persecution – it won't be easy. He says you have to carry a cross. And the only way you will be able to bear that cross and follow him is if you trust him absolutely. But if you place another person first, you are in fact trusting in that human relationship rather than in him. You're trusting in some person to provide you security, or meaning, or purpose, or love, or companionship, or whatever it is you draw from that relationship.

And here's where the problem becomes most evident: all human relationships must end. Quite literally they come to a *dead end* because if you don't die first, you will experience the end of every human relationship you now enjoy either through neglect or conflict or betrayal or death. And if you are drawing your sense of security, meaning, purpose, love, – your reason for being – from that relationship, what will you do then? Whom will you trust then? We could hope at that point you'd turn to the Lord, recognizing that he is the one you should have been trusting in all along; but all too often at such times, if you've made another person your idol, you're likely to adopt an attitude of indignation. "How could you, Lord? How could you take this person from me? What kind of God are you anyway?"

The answer is that he's a God who requires our absolute trust. He's a God who demands to have first place in our hearts. And when we feel angry or resentful toward him when one of our human relationships comes to an end, we've only proven that first is not the place he occupied. And again, the question is how can you take up your cross and follow him if you're only half-hearted in your commitment?

That's the challenge Jesus is now throwing down before this crowd of people who imagine that they are his disciples because they're walking down the trail after him – or perhaps because we're sitting here in church this morning. He's speaking to us. He's speaking to people who glibly assume that being a disciple is something easy: "I'll follow you anywhere Jesus, lead on! It's no problem for me!" And he says, "Really? Well don't come to me half way. Sit down and count the cost, now that I've told you what it is."

And then he gives us two illustrations. The first is a building project. He says before someone decides to build a tower, he takes stock of his resources to determine whether he can afford to finish it. Because if he starts and lays a foundation, and then comes up short, he will become an object of ridicule for his neighbors. The partially completed tower will stand as a monument to his failure. So, it is with any would-be disciple who begins to follow Jesus but has his loyalty divided. Oh, they start with great plans and honest intentions, but because their trust is only partial, the tower of Christian faith and life is never

completed. Somewhere along the line the project comes grinding to a halt. Half built, it eventually weathers away and collapses in ruin. Because of this, Jesus says count the cost before you start.

But now this presents an even greater problem: if you honestly take stock of your resources and fully consider the demands of discipleship, you will see that you're in big trouble. You have to admit, "I don't have the level of commitment he's talking about! I don't trust him like he requires. I'm unwilling to put certain human relationships behind my relationship with him. I do want to cling to father, mother, spouse, child, and so on. ... I don't have the resources to finish building this tower. Which means *I can't be a disciple of Jesus.*"

And strangely enough, *that's* the answer you need to come to if you are to become and remain a *true* disciple of Jesus. *You can't build your tower of discipleship.* Nor can you do it with the help of all those people who are dear to you. *This* is the realization to which Jesus wants you to come. And the next example he gives clearly illustrates this. In it, we are to put ourselves in the place of a king of a small country. It was very common in those days for big nations to subjugate the smaller ones around it, and then have them pay annual tribute for the privilege of being conquered. It's sort of the international version of the bully at school who takes the other kids' lunch money and beats them up when they don't pay. So, now, here you are in your kingdom with your army of 10,000 soldiers. You know that the king coming against you is advancing with an army of 20,000. You have to decide whether it would be better to try to fight it out, or to ask for terms. Either way, it's going to cost you something. If you decide to fight, there will be a siege. It means deprivations for your kingdom: starvation and disease. They'll burn up your crops and orchards. Finally, there will be a bloody battle – which you might lose. And that will mean pillage, rapine, fire, and, if you live, being sold into slavery. And even if you win the battle, the costs are going to be horrendous. Thousands might be slain. On the other hand, you could sue for peace. You could send your most capable and reliable representative to the opposing force while it is still a long way off, and you'd have to trust him to arrange the best terms possible for you. You'd keep your kingdom, but at a price. Jesus says you must compare the costs and make the best choice.

But before you do, let's look at what's really headed your way. It's not an army of 20,000 warriors; it's the Lord God who is coming in judgment with ten thousand times ten thousand of his holy angels. That's going to be tough to beat. And what have you got on your side? Well, there's yourself ... and maybe your family and friends ... though I don't know how much help they'll be, since they are in exactly the same situation. Looks like you're in trouble. And at this point you should see how futile your human relationships really are. No one is going to stand with you in the judgment: no parent, spouse, child, or sibling. You'll be all on your own. I'd say it's time to sue for peace. You need to send your best and most trusted representative to arrange terms.

Who? Well, Jesus Christ, of course: he's the one you want representing you in the judgment. You want to place all your trust in him. And his purpose in giving this example is so that you will see that. He *wants* you to trust him – because that's what it means to be his disciple. And the good news is that *you can trust him* because he's already arranged the best terms possible. He faced the coming judgment for you. While the army coming to execute God's wrath was still far away from you, he went as your representative to secure your peace – and more than that: he himself paid the price. He carried the cross for you, and he died in your place.

You see, by relinquishing your trust in all your human relationships – all those people who are dear to you, but who are ultimately unable to help you—by subordinating those relationships to your trust in Jesus, you win in the end. By losing what you have, you gain everything Christ can give you. Now you can build your tower, not with the flimsy materials of your own half-hearted ability to follow Jesus – which is only a bunch of hay and stubble doomed to burn up anyway. But instead, you build with the precious stones of true repentance, and the solid gold of complete trust in Christ and what he did for you. By trusting in him, he builds and completes the tower of your life and faith. He makes you his disciple.

And finally, in what is perhaps the greatest irony of this morning's Gospel lesson, when you are a disciple who puts Jesus first and foremost, you do not lose the people who are dear to you – the ones Jesus says you have to "hate" in order to be his disciple. In fact, by "hating" them in relative deference to Jesus, you now have the opportunity and power to truly love them, and to enjoy real and everlasting relationships with them. Our present human relationships are all founded on what we get from others: the sense of love,

security, meaning, and so forth that they give to us. We trust them to provide these things. But when our trust is in Jesus to fulfill all our needs of this life and the next, we are free not to take from the people we say we love, but rather to give ourselves to them. That's what true love is all about. And that's what it means to be a disciple of him who loved us and gave himself for us. May we be such disciples. May we place all our hope and trust in him now in time so that we may give him our praise and thanks forever in glory. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***