

Disciples Worth Their Salt

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I want you to picture the scene in today's Gospel reading. Jesus is on the move. He is marching steadily forward with one goal in mind. It's a major theme in Luke's Gospel from this point on: that Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem where he's got a job to do. And he is determined to get there and do what must be done.

And the people whose towns and villages through which he passes on the way see this. They know all about Jesus (or at least they think they do). He's been stirring things up for the better part of three years. At this point most have heard some of his teaching – and they've been impressed by it. Many have been healed by him from all kinds of dread ailments. Many more know someone who's been healed. And though Jesus has made some enemies of the Scribes and Pharisees, he's quite popular with the masses. So as they see him making this steady march on Jerusalem, they want to be part of it. They get up and follow along behind him. They join his train. So what you've got is a snowballing crowd of people accumulating in Jesus' wake. And they're excited. They see themselves as part of a great messianic uprising that will usher in the kingdom of God on earth. They imagine that they are on the cusp of the return to the glory days of Israel, like things were under the reigns of David and Solomon—oh, but so much more than that. They think they are marching toward glory and freedom from oppression and prosperity and easy living and lavish comforts and feather beds. No more worries or troubles. It's all upside and no downside. That's what they *think* following Jesus means.

Jesus knows otherwise. He knows all too well what lies ahead – and it's not at all what people following him expect. Jesus knows that in Jerusalem he will face rejection, betrayal, abandonment, a sham trial, laughing and scorn, shame and humiliation, hatred and cruel punishment, and finally the agony of cross and the cold of the grave. But he also knows that from his sacrifice of himself as the offering of atonement for the sins of the world and his subsequent resurrection to life there will indeed arise a kingdom – the kingdom of God on earth, which won't be like any other earthly kingdom. No, this kingdom will transcend borders. It will include people from all nations and races who will be united not with a common tongue or constitution, but with a common confession: that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is Savior and Lord. This kingdom will be his Church, and it will endure forever. But like the Lord who founded it, while in this world, this kingdom and those who are part of it will suffer rejection, humiliation, persecution, and loss. They too will carry a cross.

And so it is that Jesus suddenly turns to the growing crowd of people following him and tells them the truth about what it means to be his disciple. He wants to inform them of the cost now, at the beginning, so that they won't be disillusioned or fall away when they're called upon to pay it. They need to know that in this world he offers them no promise of happiness or success or easy living. Rather, he can almost certainly guarantee them trouble, trial, and hardship. There will be a price to pay. And you'd better sit down and reckon the cost now before you start down the path of discipleship because you don't want to get the job only part done and then decide to quit.

What kinds of costs are involved? Jesus doesn't leave us wondering. He says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and

brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.” Wow. Those are hard words. And not easily understood at first.

By way of explanation, let me try this: when I do counseling with couples who are planning to be married, I tell them that human relationships have to be prioritized. When you are a child and growing up, your number one relationship is with your parents. It's to them that you owe your first allegiance. Then, secondly, to your siblings; then third to other close relatives; and then to friends and acquaintances outside the family. Blood is thicker than water, as they say. But that changes when you get married. From that point on, your primary attachment is to your spouse. That relationship, that person, becomes your first allegiance and top priority. Your relationship with your parents becomes secondary. And I can't tell you how many marriages have been ruined by people not understanding this and failing to change their priorities. It changes again when your children come along. Then they become your secondary human relationship. Your parents get bumped to third place. And if you're wondering why your children don't become your first priority, it's because you'll have them in your care for only 18 years or so. Then they'll be off on their own, getting married, and starting their own families. Your spouse will stay with you for a lifetime. That's the person with whom you are always to be and remain one flesh. Besides, if you really love your children, the best gift you can give them is two parents who truly hold each other first. That will create the kind of stable and loving home environment in which children can thrive. And make no mistake: just as a parent who is more dear to one member of a couple than his or her spouse can ruin a marriage, so it can be ruined when one of the couple gives the children top priority at the expense of their spouse.

The point of all this is to say that sometimes we are forced to choose. Suppose a man has a mother who is constantly criticizing his wife. She refuses to treat her daughter-in-law with respect. The mother thinks, “She's not good enough for my son. Nothing she does is ever right.” And all of this is making the man's wife miserable. At that point it becomes incumbent for him to pull his mother aside and read her the riot act. “Mom, you know I love you. And I'm grateful for all you've done for me. But I will not allow you to treat my wife this way. She has first place in my heart. Not you. And if you insist on forcing me to choose between the two of you, you lose. You'll not welcome in my home.”

It's in this sense that Jesus speaks of hating family members. In the example I gave, the man hated his mother relative to his wife. In the same way, Jesus demands that all our other human relationships take backseat to our relationship with him. If forced to choose between him or someone else, that someone else – whoever they may be – must lose.

And think of the immediate context here: after the death and resurrection of Jesus the Church would start to grow, beginning at Jerusalem. And those who came to faith in Christ did so almost always over the loud, angry protests of their family members. Most of the Jews hated Jesus and rejected him. And if one of their relations became a Christian, that person was often disowned, driven out, and persecuted. These believers, these new disciples, were forced to choose what was more important to them: their families or their faith in Jesus. For many people it's that still way today. Jews and Hindus who convert to Christianity are still often disowned by their relatives. In Muslim lands people who convert to Christ can be murdered by their families. Those who aren't killed live as second class citizens with the constant threat of death and persecution. They know the cost of discipleship. They pay it every day.

Now, for the most part we don't live with those kinds of overt dangers; but we are still subject to being tempted to placing various human relationships over our relationship with the risen Lord. For us it happens in a more subtle way. Take the case of a woman raised in the

Confessional Lutheran Church who falls in love with and marries a man who is a member of a church in which basic biblical truths are denied. They don't believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures, say. Maybe they deny the virgin birth of Jesus or his physical resurrection from the dead. Or they say they do believe the Bible; but they don't believe that Baptism is a work of God through which he creates faith and forgives sin. They don't believe the words of Jesus, "This is my body. This is my blood." They teach that Holy Communion is a mere symbolic act of remembrance. Whatever. Now, if she, for the sake of a human relationship, is willing to renounce what she knows to be true to become a member of her husband's church, thereby publicly confessing what she knows to be false, to that same extent she is removing Christ from first place and effectively making an idol of her husband.

There are any number of other examples I could give; but let this one suffice. The point is that anytime we place more value on a human relationship than our trust in Christ and his truth (or any part of it) – to that same extent we are showing that we are not his disciples. And that is never a safe or wise thing to do.

But I have to move on because included in that list of family members that must come behind our relationship with Jesus was the one person we all love and cherish the most: our own selves. I haven't addressed that yet. This is the hardest one – and unfortunately the one on which we all fail the most. Again, we start by looking at the immediate context of Jesus' words. Many of those who were walking behind him and heard him speak were later forced to make that choice. They were told either you deny Jesus and your trust in him or we'll kill you – or beat you, confiscate your goods, destroy your home, and drive you into exile. For them, that was the cost of discipleship. And many of them paid it dearly. Others, however, didn't. When forced to choose between their lives and their trust in Christ, their faith failed them. They let fear and their love of their lives in this world cause them to deny Jesus. Fortunately some of these later repented and returned to Christ. Others did not, and now they are lost forever.

I'm sure you know that today many of our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world are daily facing the same choice. They know how much it costs to be a disciple. And they are paying the price. They are carrying their crosses and suffering for their faith. And meanwhile we, who find ourselves in conditions in which we are asked to pay so much less, are often unwilling to do even that. One of the great scandals of our church is how many have had laid for them a firm foundation. They were baptized into Christ. They were raised in Christian homes. They were trained and confirmed in the faith. They stood before the altar and confessed they would suffer all, even death, rather than depart from the faith ... and then they gave it up. They walked away. They stopped feeding their faith and eventually it died. And now their unfinished towers of discipleship stand around us like so many tombstones: monuments to souls that were once alive in Christ and now are dead because they couldn't be bothered to pay even the smallest cost of discipleship.

But there's more to it than that, for the call of Christ to discipleship is the continuous call to die to self: to renounce the pleasures of sin and selfishness, to confess your faults and wrongdoings, to receive again and again the powerful Word of Christ's forgiveness, and by his Spirit to live a life of sacrificial love and service for others. That's what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Anything less, and don't fool yourself. You cannot be his disciple.

And that's why Jesus tells you to count the cost. You don't want to be one who starts to build and cannot finish. You don't want to be one who goes to fight a war you cannot win. You have to count the cost of discipleship to see if you've got what it takes.

But now here's the best part. If you do that, if you sit down and determine what your own resources and capabilities amount to, you'll recognize at once that you haven't got enough. The truth is that you can't even get started on your own. To pay for your tower, you'll have to borrow from someone who will give you what you need. To fight the war against what's coming against you in the judgment, you'll have to get someone else to fight for you. That person, of course, is Jesus. He's the one who pays for and builds your tower. He's the one who goes to fight the war for you and wins. The life of a disciple is learning to despair of your own abilities and miserable faithfulness and constantly turning more and more to trust in Jesus who was faithful and obedient for you. And to help us understand this, Jesus speaks of salt that loses its flavor – which might not seem to make sense.

I'll explain it in a minute, but before I do, you've probably heard the expression about someone who is known to be a good and competent worker. If so, we say that they're "worth their salt". It's an old expression which comes from the ancient Roman Empire. Back then salt was an extremely important commodity. It was vital both to season food and to cure meat – the latter of which was crucial in a day when there was no way to freeze, refrigerate, or can meat. And decent salt was often difficult to come by. And so, when coin was scarce (as was usually the case), Roman soldiers would be paid in salt because it could be easily traded for other goods and services just like money. As a matter of fact we get the word *salary* from this: the Latin word for salt is *sal* (s-a-l). Your salary was your pay in the form of salt. And so if you were worth your salt, it means you earned it.

Now, it happens that the salt used in Jesus' time in Palestine came from mines near the Dead Sea. This salt contained small traces of gypsum, which is a compound of calcium and sulfur. When recently mined, this salt tastes like any other salt; but upon long term exposure to air and moisture, the gypsum gives the salt a distinctly stale and unpleasant taste. At that point it's no good. Instead of making food taste better, it ruins it. It still preserves meat, but it makes it so that nobody wants to eat it. So it's useless. It's actually less than useless because what do you do with it? If you throw it out, the salt contaminates the soil and makes it so that plants can't grow. If you throw it in the manure pile, you can't use it for fertilizer. It's like toxic waste. You can only put it away where it won't do any harm and buy new.

Our faith in Christ, our discipleship under him, work exactly the same way. Yesterday's faith is no good for today. The way you followed Jesus yesterday doesn't matter. If you're counting on these things to help you today, you're using old salt that's become worthless. Throw it away. It's no good. To be a disciple today you need to get new faith for today – faith which comes by hearing the Word of God, faith which comes by confessing your sins and hearing of Christ's saving work for you, faith which comes by receiving his body and blood in Holy Communion. That's the new salt that has flavor and that works to preserve you today. And with such faith you will prove to be a disciple who's worth your salt.

God grant it to us for Jesus sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!