

The Cost of Discipleship

In the name of him who calls us to bear our own crosses and come after him, dear friends in Christ: We hear in today's Gospel that great crowds were accompanying Jesus. And it's small wonder why: no one had ever before seen or heard anything like this miracle working Rabbi from Galilee. He was a first century sensation. People traveling with him experienced just one exciting surprise after another. And his teaching—incredible! He made the Scriptures come alive. He applied God's Word to his hearers in astounding ways. Why, when he taught you had the feeling that God was speaking to you directly (I know, right?). It was hard not to be pulled into this large and growing throng that was walking along with Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem.

Yes, to Jerusalem, the city of the Lord God, where this swelling crowd expects great things to happen upon arrival. They feel they are the cusp of a new age. Jesus, the Lord's long promised Messiah, is going to take charge. He's going to reestablish the kingdom and throne of David. We'll crown him our king. And then with his mighty miracles he'll sweep away the hated Romans. This will be our own country once again. And things are going to be grand. It will be a return to the days of Israel's splendor under King Solomon – except even better. Why, it will be like paradise on earth. We'll all be rich. We'll live like kings. We'll never have any wants or needs or health problems. We'll live happily ever after. *That's* what the crowd expects.

Jesus, of course, knows otherwise. It's true that he is the long promised Messiah. It's also true that he's going to Jerusalem to establish his kingdom. And it's true that he will be crowned king. So the crowd has some it right. But his kingdom is not of this world. The crown he'll wear will be made of thorns. The throne he takes will be a cross. And by his suffering and death for sin he will sweep away a far greater oppressor than the Romans; he'll defeat the devil, death, and hell. He is going the way of the cross to establish an everlasting kingdom founded upon his shed blood and his death for sin. And those who follow him into his kingdom, his true disciples, must also follow the way of the cross.

Thus it is that Jesus turns and tells them essentially, folks, this isn't going where you think it is. To follow me is a total commitment. It's going to cost a lot more than you think. "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

Those are strong words. And they don't sound at all like Jesus, do they? Isn't he always preaching how we are to love one another? Doesn't the commandment say that we're to honor our parents? And now we're supposed to hate them and everyone else? What's up with that? Well, think about it. In the not too distant future, if you're one of the people in this crowd, you will have to choose. After Jesus' death and resurrection, as the Gospel is being proclaimed and Christ's kingdom the Church begins to grow, being a disciple of Jesus will mean severing relationships with some or all of your loved ones. Not that you'll cut *them* off, but they'll cut *you* off. Remember the vast majority of the Jews will reject Jesus as the Savior. And they'll cut all ties with anyone in the family who becomes a disciple of the crucified and risen Lord. So, when Jesus says you must hate them, he means it in the sense of relative to me. When they tell you that you can have them or Jesus in your life but not both, the answer has to be Jesus. That will be a cost of discipleship for many.

And for others, the cost will be even more personal. Jesus includes even your own life on that list. He says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." I don't think those words impact us the same way they would have the people in the crowd. We speak of bearing crosses in a figurative sense. But they'd all seen crucifixions. They knew the horror of what it meant to carry a cross. And some of them actually would be crucified for their faith. They'd be asked to choose between their own lives – death by torture – and Jesus. Many others would suffer in other ways. They'd be imprisoned, beaten, have their property confiscated; they'd be driven out of their homes, exiled, and pursued like criminals. And they could end it at any point. They could renounce the name of Jesus, stop the reason for their persecution, and be re-embraced by their families. But then, of course, they would no longer be disciples of Christ. To be his disciple, they'd have to bear the cost; and keep on bearing it.

Jesus didn't want those following him to be under any delusions. He wanted to put far away the dreams of sugar-plums that were dancing through their heads. He wanted them to know that the cost of discipleship could be – and for many of them would be – extremely high. And he wants us to know it too.

This is important because like then, today great crowds are following Jesus. Many, at least here in America who have come under the influence of the health and prosperity preachers, are in it for temporal benefits they are told they will receive. Your best life now: God wants you to be rich and successful and healthy, and if you just have enough faith in your dream, God will make it come true. This is not the Christian faith. And those who have been deceived by it are not disciples of Jesus.

Hopefully none of us is under any such delusions. But let's face it: up until this point none of us has ever experienced anything like the cost of discipleship that Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel. Being a Christian in this country is pretty cheap and easy. Oh, there are some costs. The cultural and scientific elites sometimes ridicule us for what they believe to be our childish faith in a supreme being. I, for one, am happy for a childish faith in Jesus, so the insult fails to sting. There's the occasional argument with a family member who sees things differently about one point of doctrine or another; but you're still on speaking terms. The issue of closed communion creates a bit of tension sometimes within families; but again, no one hates you for it.

And there other costs; mostly of time and effort. There's the time we spend here receiving Christ's gifts. A survey released this last week asked formerly active churchgoers why they gave it up. One of the biggest reasons given was that it was just too much of a hassle to get up and go to services. Friends, let me say it as plainly as I can: if you can't trouble yourself to come where Jesus is speaking and forgiving sin and serving his body and blood and pouring out his Holy Spirit, you cannot be his disciple.

Another reason given on the survey was the fear that they'd be asked to do something. And yes, that's another cost of discipleship. Keeping the church going means serving as officers or on committees or as Sunday school teachers or helping out with all the other things that need to be done. Disciples of Jesus gladly bear the cost of serving their brothers and sisters in Christ with the talents God has given them. A strong reluctance to serve ought to call into question the quality of one's discipleship.

And then there is the actual cost of running the church, by which I mean the finances. Together we bear that cost proportionately according to the measure of wealth *and faith* with

which the Lord has blessed us. But that's about it. We really have no idea what it is to incur the kinds of costs of discipleship that Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. We've had it real easy for a long time. And if we grumble about and balk at the incredibly low cost we have now, it makes me wonder how we'd stand up if the cost suddenly got a lot higher.

You are aware, no doubt, that some of our brothers in sisters in Christ particularly in Muslim dominated countries are paying that high cost of discipleship right now. They have for a long time. New converts are especially aware that their own family members are likely to kill them for confessing the name of Jesus. Many of the refugees now fleeing the Middle East are converting to Christianity upon arrival in Europe. Some of them have been accused of doing this only to gain asylum, so they won't be sent back to where they came from; but they don't need to be sent back to face persecution. Their fellow refugees are persecuting them. They convert knowing what the cost will be. Jesus and his saving Gospel is worth it to them.

Is it worth it to us? Is it worth it to you? We do not know what the future holds, but if trends continue the way they have been going we may soon be asked to pay a higher cost for our discipleship than we are at present. In the State of Wyoming one of our fellow LCMS members, Ruth Neely, has served for over 20 years as a municipal judge in Pinedale. She was also recently appointed to an unpaid position as a circuit court magistrate, in which capacity she is authorized but in no way required to perform civil marriage ceremonies. A reporter called her and asked her hypothetically if she would be willing to officiate at a same sex marriage. She told the reporter that she'd find someone else to do it. And now she's on trial. The state judicial committee wants her removed from all offices and fined \$40,000 for her bias. In arguments before the state supreme court, they called her moral convictions about traditional marriage (which are ours too, by the way) repugnant and hateful, not to be tolerated in a free society – which is self-contradictory: what makes a society free is that you're free to speak your mind. Not anymore, it seems. The decision is still pending in that case; but I think it's fair to say that it's a portent of things to come. It's one thing to be called childish for your faith. It's quite another for the legal apparatus of the state to label you repugnant and hateful, not to be tolerated. Look for things to get worse.

I believe that it was the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said that the call of Jesus to discipleship is the call to come and die. That's the cost. And so we pay it. Daily through repentance we die with Christ to sin and self. And we rise with him to live gladly confessing his name before the world and serving others in our vocations in the family, in the church, and in the community. Jesus has not promised that the road will be easy or the burden light. He's promised us a cross to bear. But we trust that whatever cross or cost he assigns, he will also give us the strength to bear. We are certain of this because we know that he has already done all the heavy lifting when he bore for us the sins of the world. The reward he has for us far exceeds the cost of discipleship. Therefore in Christ, let us carry on. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!