

Discipleship: Weighing the Costs
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Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

It's my first Sunday as your new pastor and I'm given this passage from the lectionary to bring the message today. Hilarious! What a great one to completely empty a church! When I saw this was the designated passage for this week I shook my head and laughed out loud. Really, God? I'm really supposed to speak on this? It's completely inconceivable.

The passage makes me quite certain that Jesus was an introvert because I can't imagine a better way for him to get rid of the crowds than to say what he does here: In a series of double-negatives, he says if you want to be my disciple, you must hate your family members, carry a cross (which at that time was not a metaphor but meant literally being publicly tortured in the most horrific way) and you must give up all your possessions. Did he just need some time alone, so he said the most offensive things he could think of? Were there no Public Relations firms back then that he could have consulted first?

I mean, can you imagine banners on our door – Join us this Sunday to learn about discipleship! Hate your family! Be publicly executed a torturous death, give up everything you own –Services at 10am, all are welcome. Do you think people would come flooding in?

So why does Jesus say this to the crowds? Why does he uphold the impossible as requirements for discipleship? He gives people exactly what they need, so why do these crowds need to hear this? Are they supposed to understand that faith is not a passing fad, it requires a trust that asks us to give up everything we think we need to survive? Is he trying to let the crowds know, hey, we're not on our way to a

carnival! This is serious business. If you want the good life, abundant life, if you want to follow me, there are going to be sacrifices. Are you willing to make the commitment?

Two weeks ago we discussed the call passage from Jeremiah. God said, "I've called you to be a prophet to the nations," and Jeremiah replies, "Oh, not me, I'm just a boy, I can't speak, so I can't do that." And God replies firmly, "You will. And I'm going to be there for you." At the time, however, it's inconceivable to Jeremiah how he is going to accomplish God's plan for his life.

When are we called to do the inconceivable? Can you think of times that you were faced with a proposition that seemed impossible, and yet you were compelled to move forward with it? Hundreds of people come here to this church every week for the support and fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous, committing themselves one day at a time to sacrificing what they once held most dear, most important in their lives. To the newcomers, it is inconceivable to imagine a life without alcohol. Alcohol is their social security. Then again, it is inconceivable to keep living the way they are living, their lives being run by the desire to drink and the consequences that come with it. They are at the point that they cannot live with it, nor without it.

This conundrum is expressed explicitly in the Bible by Paul, who, frankly, has all the characteristics of an addict. He says in Romans 7: "15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." Paul is crying out for help. He clearly needs some guidance!

I like the idea that we're given enough light just to see the next step in our lives, that if we were given the whole picture, the full view of the future, we'd never be able to carry on, knowing the challenges and sacrifices we're in for. We have to experience them bit by bit.

For example, if parents really knew what parenting entailed, and the demands and sacrifices it involves, the world would probably be childless. There is a mantra many parents adopt for those early years... "Sleep is overrated." They never realized what a luxury sleep is until they were faced with sleepless nights over and over and over...first in the infant years, and then again in the teenage years.

I was sharing with a neighbor this week that I had just launched both of my sons to college, that it was my first night of empty nest. He laughed. "Oh, you're not ever really empty nest. They still need you, until it's their turn to take care of you." None of us would take on the commitment of parenting if we knew the challenges, the cost of giving everything we have. "Hate your family, carry your cross, give up all your possessions" to the disciple is like hearing, "You can never have another drink" to the alcoholic or "You'll never have another good night of sleep" to the new parent. "Wave bye-bye to life as you know it!"

Jesus asks the crowds to weigh the costs the way a builder plans out if he has enough materials to complete construction, or the way a king determines whether his army is large enough to wage war against his opponent. And then he adds, *So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

Earlier this week I was speaking with my tax accountant about the specifics of the new position of full-time pastor and the tax implications and conditions. I was asked if I had taken a vow of poverty. Uhhhhh.... No.... I replied, with a mixture of sudden apprehension that perhaps I was supposed to, and complete awe for those who actually do. Oh, ok, the tax accountant said nonchalantly, because clergy who take vows of poverty don't have to pay social security tax. But then, they don't receive social security benefits, either. Vow of poverty... I pondered, thinking about my friends, the Sisters, who live in the Mt. Carmel convent in Mill Valley and their "social security benefits."

Besides a federal program for retirement, created by President Roosevelt in 1935, what is "social security?" When I think of "social security," or what makes me secure in my social identity, I think of, my relationships: family, friends, church community, various other spiritual communities, professional communities. I think about the social circles that form my identity, my sense of self. All the webs of connection that give me my social security.

I sought counsel with one of the Sisters this week, my friend Sister Teresa Benedicta. I was challenged by this passage and still stunned by being asked by my tax accountant if I had taken a vow of poverty. You see, Sister Teresa Benedicta did take a vow of poverty, along with vows of chastity and obedience. So I visited with her and I asked her what that was really like. She said the hardest part for her in going to the convent at age 18 was leaving her family. She couldn't call them and would only be able to see them one time a year. She told the priest that this seemed "unnatural" and she was really struggling with this commitment.

The priest quoted the very passage read today, stating that a disciple must hate family, and she said that was really not very helpful. What *was* helpful, was when he told her to consult other Sisters who had also experienced separation from family. She was told, "It may seem like there's a distance, but you'll actually be closer to your family because of your relationship with God." Indeed, she said, her older brother, with whom she fought growing up, came to her after she took her vows and shared his deepest heartfelt feelings with her and asked if she would pray for some of his friends.

She said that there is security in taking a vow of obedience because she knows and trusts that whatever she is given is God's will for her. When she walks into the classroom to teach each day, she knows that each child is there for a reason, and that she has a divine purpose for being with them. She said there is freedom in

taking a vow of obedience because she has no choice or say in where she is placed or sent; again, she knows wherever it is that it is God's will for her life.

And regarding the vow of poverty... she said with a smile that there are no barriers between her and the poor. She doesn't have anything that would create a wall or separation. She is truly present with each person she is with because she doesn't have even a phone to distract her. Is it a huge risk to let go of what we hold most dear to accept God's calling on our lives? Yes. And do I agree with the tax accountant, that clergy who take vows of poverty don't receive social security benefits? No.

Perhaps what Jesus is saying is that the demands of discipleship *are* inconceivable. Jesus asks the crowd, asks us, to consider if we have what it takes and none of us do. Not Paul, not Sister Teresa Benedicta. We need God's help. Just as Jeremiah said, "I'm not fit for what you're calling me to do" and God says, "Yes you are, because I am with you."

So I'm wondering if the point of this passage is for us to recognize and admit that we don't have what it takes. "No, I'm not able to hate my family or carry a cross and be hung up on it to die or give away all my possessions. I'm not able to give up drinking or sleep. And that's exactly why I'm going to say yes to following you, Jesus. Because I can't do it on my own, because I'm not capable of building the tower or winning the war or even striking a peaceful surrender. I need your help with all of that."

The community that Luke upheld in his writing of this gospel and of the book of Acts is one of shared resources. Not each person for him or herself but a community of support and belonging, where no one is left out or forgotten or less than.

That's what this community does when we gather. We show up broken and overwhelmed and yet somehow we pull it off, we leave renewed because we trust in God and God's community. We trust in one another.

Jesus asks us to weigh the costs of discipleship. Are we willing to do the inconceivable? No, not really. Do we have a choice? No, not really, when we consider the alternative, like the alcoholic who takes the drink or the parent who refuses to answer the baby's cry. We thus humbly commit to it not because we can but because the Spirit compels us to choose life. We die to our old lives to gain new, fresh, Spirit-filled lives. Not taking a drink is a little death at first. Not having sleep is a little death at first. The sacrifice is worth the cost, even if we don't know it at the time. Those who stay in AA are able to say that their worst day sober is still better than their best day drinking. This is because of their relationship with God, a spirituality that fills what the bottle never could. Those who commit to parenting are able to realize that the pain of parenting is the other side of love. It hurts because we love so deeply.

If we stay on course in the commitment, we are provided with what we need. We will not be perfect. We're not called to be perfect, we are called to be faithful. When we weigh the costs, then, doesn't it seem that it's the alternative that is inconceivable: A life without faith? Strip me of everything I have, of everything I hold dear, and like Job, I will still praise your name, O Lord.

The challenge today, friends, is to trust that we will be provided with God's grace to face whatever it is that comes our way. Do we have what it takes on our own? No. Do we have what it takes with God on our side? Yes. This is the Good News.

Let us now turn to hymn # 725 and sing together *O Jesus, I Have Promised*.