

## Luke 14: 25-33

## The Cost-Benefit of Discipleship

Growing up in a small nurturing congregation, my pastor was a deeply caring woman but never sugar-sweet. Even in her soft gaze that met me from her pulpit, there was a certain sternness that made me sit up straight, a sternness that made me remember I had a backbone. Maybe because it was from her I as a child heard the stories of Jesus, Jesus to me was never sugar-sweet either. He can be quite stern at times, as he is in today's pericope, and challenges us to see if our faith has a backbone.

Jesus's words here 'to hate those who are dearest to us' are not just stern but so contradict what we've been taught that we are shocked. And the way he speaks incessantly in the negative, "if you cannot," "if you do not," "you cannot be my disciple...." is not very inviting but rather off-putting, don't you find? As you heard these words, did you feel your body tense up and a guard go up? Ooh, this is not for me...

When in the Gospel Jesus appears to be acting out of character by saying outrageous things, like we've seen him do already a few times on his journey toward Jerusalem, let's remember that the gospel is the Good News of Jesus Christ, to be read through the lens of our faith, even if it takes for us to step back a bit and take a cue from the details in the story before we can hear the "good news." So, I invite you to relax your body and open your heart and mind in trust.

So, who is Jesus talking to here? He's talking to the large crowds traveling with him. The scene has changed from the private space of the synagogue and the dinner table where we've heard him talk about sabbath and table fellowship, and he's now back on a public road as he continues his journey toward Jerusalem. Here, he is not talking to his inner circle of disciples, but to a wider circle of would-be disciples and disciples-wanna-bes. They had responded to something

they saw or experienced in Jesus and were drawn to him. Perhaps some have dropped out and gone home, while others have joined along the way, and they have not yet had a clue how their world views and values would be turned upside down and inside out if they continued with Jesus on his way. (Do you have a clue or has the course of your life changed since you became his disciple?)

So, before going further, Jesus responds to the enthusiastic crowds and gives them a straight talk, to help them do the cost-benefit analysis of what it means to be his disciples, learn his way of life, and live accordingly. Will they still say, “I’m game.” (Are we still game?)

First off, Jesus says “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.” If you cannot wrap your head around Jesus telling you to “hate” anyone, let alone your family, know this: Jesus was using a word in Aramaic that means to turn away from, to detach oneself from; there is nothing of that emotion that makes people say, “I hate you.” The Message translation of this passage is helpful; it reads “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self!—can’t be my disciple.”

“Hate” here does not mean anger or hostility; rather, Jesus is pointing to what must come first. If we are to be his disciple, it is him and his way that guides our lives and not other important people in our lives, no matter how dear they are to us. Discipleship challenges the most sacred of human relationship, and that’s the cost of discipleship. The claim of Jesus on us not only takes precedence but, in fact, redefines and transforms our relationship to everyone and everything else, including, all our possessions.

And here is the twist: in that redefining and transformation that happens when you put God first, is the benefit of discipleship. Although Jesus is pointing

specifically to the cost of discipleship here in this pericope, telling them what they need to “hate” and let go, when we “Love God” above all else and let our lives be ruled by God, we can finally love others as we ought.

While it is hard to compare loving God, the mystery that holds us, to loving our earthly family and loved ones who are ‘our flesh and blood,’ and ‘the stuff our lives are made of,’ loving God first only empowers us to love others as God loves, and not just our loved ones but even our enemies, better than our small self could ever have loved them.

Imagine your grandkids; imagine loving them with God’s love, watching them grow up through God’s eyes, and what kind of grandparents God will have you be? To get there though, we must first be ready to let go of those who have claims on us, be detached from them so we can be attached to God.

And perhaps the hardest is to “hate” even our own self. Again, Jesus is not calling us to embrace self-abasement; it is a call to remember our life is anything only in the One in whom we live and move and have our being. We are who we are because of God.

Invitation to become disciples of Jesus is an invitation to love others with the radical love of God. Ironically, our earthly loves and our earthly wisdom, and really our attachment to them, get in the way, because God’s love is so radical in mercy, compassion, inclusion, forgiveness, to a point where it goes against our cultural norm; it defies the “common sense” of the world. If we follow Jesus’s way, all the way, soon or later, we will be confronted with the forces in the world that would not like us. And there, we will find our cross that Jesus says his disciples would be carrying: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

The cross for us now is just a symbol, and we wear them casually and say things like “oh, that is my cross to bear.” In Jesus’s time, a cross was an

instrument for death sentence, used by the Roman government to publicly execute those who did not follow their law. Jesus was put on the cross to die, because his words and actions disturbed the system that the religious and political leaders had a tight control over. If these followers became Jesus's disciples and followed his way, they, too, would be brought to the cross.

So, to "bear one's cross" has nothing to do with challenges in life in general. Fortunately, you and I do not live under that threat of crucifixion, but if the cross has any symbolic meaning for us today, it is our willingness to suffer the consequence of following Jesus as our guide, even or especially when it disturbs the systems in our society.

Perhaps you can think back in your life and recognize a moment when you picked up your cross... When you stepped into act in love that reflected God's love, even if you had to risk your own comfort and suffer the consequences.

Jesus knows what awaits him in Jerusalem, at the end of the journey: betrayal, suffering and death on the cross. Through the two parables, Jesus shows how a wise person would not begin a project until being sure it can be finished, nor lay the foundation for a building unless he was sure he could finish it. A king would not go to war unless he had enough soldiers to resist the opposing force.

Jesus is no fool; he did not set his face for Jerusalem without being prepared to face the sacrifice. Jesus knows the cost, he knows the opposition he'd face, and he also fully trust God to accomplish God's project and prevail over the resistance of the world. Such trust is a faith with a backbone.

The crowds do not know what exactly awaits them if they became Jesus's disciples, but Jesus tells them that the priority in all aspects of their lives must change. To follow him, you cannot cling onto anything, not to your closest relationship, not to your own life, not to your possessions, and that means to put

full trust in Jesus as the way, just as Jesus put full trust in God that God will accomplish God's will to redeem the world.

There is a flip side, and that is, the benefit of being a disciple is also your life and therein is the Good News. Your life, emptied of all attachments and entrusted in Christ alone will be filled by God of abundance. So, the cost and the benefit of discipleship are both Life. Life offered in whole to God in faith, emptying itself in service of Jesus's kingdom building ministry, is the life filled with more meaning and joy, as you discover what it is to choose God in every aspect of life.

If you're not too confident about your faith having a backbone, not to worry. God invites us to grow one. That's what discipleship is all about; it's a journey and you don't go it alone. Join the band of disciples, or as the post Easter resurrection people, become a member of the body of Christ here on earth, and we will learn together what it means to follow Jesus and let the rest of our lives, our relationships, our material possessions, our place in the world, follow. Thanks be to God.