

14:25-33

We could well ask, what is Jesus doing here, if he's trying to get a popular movement going. Doesn't it sound like he is discouraging people, not encouraging them? *"Want to be my disciple, do you? Well, in that case, you have to learn to hate your family, give up all you've worked hard to accumulate, and get ready for gory death!"* Hardly the way, as we say, to win and friends and influence people. But think this way: Supposing, instead of framing it so gloomily, we think of a leader of an expedition. He is forging a way through a high and dangerous mountain pass to bring urgent medical aid to villagers cut off from the rest of the world. *"If you want to come any further,"* the leader says to those with him, *"you'll have to leave your packs behind, except the medical supplies. From here on the path is too steep to carry all that other stuff. You probably won't recover it upon return--if we return. You'd better send your last letters home, for this is a dangerous route and it's very possible that we all won't make it back alive."* So, while sobering, we can understand it. We may not like how it sounds, but we see why it makes sense. That really is the sense of what Jesus says here in this passage, and so makes it more akin to the second kind of calling than the first.

The sense of it that way doesn't undercut the seriousness of the matter. In fact, it underscores it. In our time, when Christianity is often associated with so-called "family values," it should still come as a shock to be told by Jesus to *"hate your parents and children, and siblings."* But when he goes a step further, that one must hate one's own self, and be prepared for a dreadful death--take up your cross wasn't simply a figure of speech in Jesus' world--then we begin to see what's going on. Jesus is not denying the

importance of close family, and the propriety of living in supportive harmony with them. But when there is an urgent task to be done, then everything else, including one's own life, must be put at risk for the sake of the kingdom of God.

Have you ever made a commitment to an organization or committee without first finding out what all would be expected of you? Have you ever gotten caught by purchasing something that continually renews itself like book-of-the-month club without first reading all the fine print? Here Jesus warns would-be followers about the true cost of discipleship. Some churches, preachers, and TV programs present the gospel as though they were selling cars, new or used. They make it sound as easy as possible, as though no real commitment is required. Jesus' call was far different. He wasn't looking for superficial commitment or a crowd of tagalongs. He didn't beg people to follow him. Rather, he called his followers to be totally committed if they were going to follow at all.

What Jesus was calling people to was a real risk--to a daily commitment of living on the edge. He knew that he was on his way to the cross. The crowds thought he was on his way to make an empire on their immediate behalf as they expected. In fact, it was just the opposite. He was calling people to sacrifice themselves for a greater purpose--the cause of a life of service as he himself lived. Part of the reality in the face of true Christianity is that it is possible to be an admirer of Jesus without being a disciple. You can be a camp-follower without being an actual soldier in the battle. You can be a hanger-on in some great cause but not really be pulling one's weight. Once someone was talking to a great teacher about a younger student. The man said, "*So and so tells me that he was one of your students.*" The teacher answered, "*He may have attended*

my lectures, but he was not one of my students.” I had that experience as a professor, too!

And another thing: the language of cross-bearing has been corrupted by misuse and overuse. Bearing the cross has nothing to do with a chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationship--even losing a preacher. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. This commitment is not just to a way of life, however. It is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life.

So Jesus uses these two illustrations of someone intending to build a great tower or a king going off to war with another and carefully considering the feasibility of both. And then closes with those words, *“So therefore none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions,”* (vs. 33). Many of Jesus’ followers, then and now, have owned houses and lands, and have not felt compelled to abandon them. But being prepared to do so is the sign that one has understood the seriousness of the call to follow Jesus.

Any of us, at any time, might be summoned to give up everything quite literally and respond to a new urgent situation. If we’re not ready for that, we are like the tower-builder and war-maker who haven’t thought through what they are really about. Jesus is stressing careful consideration of what it means to follow him. It is no light thing. Our world--our own country--is replete with folk who would build great towers and make wars. But where are those who take seriously the costly obedience to Jesus Christ’s commands? The commands and ways he teaches clearly in the Sermon on the

Mount we considered earlier this year. This is the challenge we all need to hear as we consider our own selves if we call ourselves “followers of Christ.”

Now, in a sense, no one can know whether he or she will be able to fulfill a commitment to discipleship. Jesus was not asking for a guarantee to complete fidelity in advance, however. If he had, no one would qualify to be a disciple. Through these illustrations, Jesus was simply calling for each person who would be a disciple to consider in advance what that commitment requires. Again, part of the current problem is that cultural accommodation of the Christian faith has progressed steadily in recent years. As a result, many see no tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of middle-class Americans. But Jesus is saying a complete change of priorities, values, and pursuits is required. Paul writes that in Christ we become not just nice people but new creations (2 Cor 5:17). When Jesus turned and saw the crowd following him, he was not impressed by his own success. He was not interested in the casual, easy acceptance the crowd offered. John’s Gospel comments, “*many believed in [Jesus] because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus...did not entrust himself to them...*” (Jn 2:23-24).

They followed him because of the “show” of miracles, not because of what he said.

It may trouble us to hear Jesus say, “*you must hate one’s father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself,*” (vs.26). But that wording is a Jewish/Hebraic way of expressing preference. If you prefer one thing or even one person over another, you were said to “love” the one and “hate” the other. But we must not let the blunt way Jesus says what he does get in the way of his call of supreme obedience to him entails. That what this whole passage is setting forth. There can be

no rival love to love of Jesus--not love of family, not love of country, not love of one's work or any-thing else. Nothing. Nothing! Discipleship is not meant to be easy or casual. It has a cost, and daily, as Jesus says in another place: "*If anyone would be my disciple, let him take up the cross daily and follow me,*" (Lk 9:23). But more than that, it is a matter of love. Yes, first, his love for us. But then--and necessarily--our love for him. And by this love/hate expression, Jesus is saying our love for him must be so far and above love for anyone or anything else, the latter will look like hate in comparison. Indeed, to seek that kind of commitment is to be salt, as he says in the next verse, and to be light, as he teaches elsewhere (Mt 5:13-16).

The cost of discipleship is paid in many kinds of currency. For some persons a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change of priorities is required of all would-be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed. No partial commitments are accepted.

Jesus is not calling spectators. He's calling recruits. The apostle Paul spoke to this in verses we considered recently from 2 Corinthians, when he says, "*We are always carry about in the body the death of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies,*"--in our lives (2 Cor 4:10). That is the "normal" Christian life by both Jesus and Paul. And we must embrace that for the authentic Christian life to be in us.

This should not sound odd to us if we hear what Jesus says. It all fits together. The same Jesus who says, "Come unto me all that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest," (Mt 11:28) is the same Jesus who says, "Blessed are you, when people

revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account,” (Mt 5:11). Indeed, with the cost of discipleship to Christ, there is also the blessing of Christ as well. You hear from the beginning in Jesus’ teaching. Hear it in Eugene Peterson’s rendering of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12, *The Message*):

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are--no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.

You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat.

You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being care-full, you find yourselves cared for.

You’re blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s Kingdom. Not only that--count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me.

What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens--give a cheer, even!--for though they don’t like it, I do!

And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.”

Let me close with this story. It is the true story of Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds of Knoxville, Tenn. Seventy years after the event, he received posthumously the “*Righteous Among the Nations*” honor from Israel, the highest honor for non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during WWII. He’s the first serviceman to be so awarded. The story, related in *The Commercial Appeal* (Dec 3, 2015), reads:

The Nazi [High Command] made their orders clear: Jewish-American prisoners of war were to be separated from their fellow brothers in arms and sent to slave labor camps, where their chances of survival were low. U.S. [Jewish] soldiers had been warned that [they] would be in danger if captured, and were told to destroy dog tags and any other evidence identifying them as Jewish.

Army Sgt. Edmonds had been captured in the Battle of the Bulge in late 1944 and was sent to German POW camp Stalag IXA, where he became the highest-ranking non-commissioned officer held in the camp [meaning all Americans were under his command within the camp]. On January 17, 1945, the German camp commander, speaking in English, ordered the Jews among the prisoners to identify themselves. Edmonds knew what was at stake in that moment. Therefore, he ordered all 1000 American captives to step forward with him, and he brazenly pronounced, “We are all Jews here.” Even with a pistol to his head, he would not back down, and amazingly, the Germans did. This story has only recently come to light but established by several Jewish Americans who witnessed it, and were themselves--with about 200 others-- saved by Edmonds’ action.

Sgt. Edmonds had a reality, a very ugly reality, to deal with by his Nazi captors. But when it came to how to act in light of his fellow Jewish-American soldiers, he had in

view another reality he lived with, another more profound reality, a Christian reality and view of the way things ought to be. And in light of that deeper reality, he could only say--expressed by his words-- "*We are all Jews here.*" Things like that happen when people take seriously the cost of discipleship, when they take seriously God's Kingdom in our midst and live it out as the followers of Jesus. Therein is both the blessing and the challenge, the challenge and the blessing, of the cost of discipleship. Amen.