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Discipleship and Detachment

Luke 14:25-33 *“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 realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold onto. --Tao te Ching (6th Cent. BCE)

A large crowd is following Jesus. They feel some attraction, interest, curiosity, and perhaps excitement. Jesus seems to be on the verge of a successful religious movement! However, Jesus suddenly stops, turns around, and brings the crowd up short with these words:

“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.” Jesus isn’t interested in a successful religious movement, at least in the world’s sense. He is seeking disciples who center their lives completely in God. He is not interested in people becoming adherents of a religious tradition. And he’s certainly not interested in religious extremism that uses his cross in the service of nationalism. Jesus is not interested in the label “Christian” but in our living the kind of life he is talking about. His words should be a splash of cold water, waking us up.

To follow Jesus, to live this new life, we are to “hate” those closest to us—spouse, siblings, friends, even our own lives. These are challenging words. In another place, Jesus’ family comes looking for him.[Mark 3:31-35] He is in a house teaching. When he is told that his mother and brothers are outside, he asks, “Who is my mother? My brothers? My family? My family is everyone who does the will of God.” There is nothing in Jesus’ teachings or life to support what is touted today as “traditional family values.” He’s not “pro-family,” at least the way that term is used these days. He calls us into a bigger family, the family of all who seek, love, and serve God throughout the world, be they “Christians” or not. Jesus calls us to a deeper and wider belonging. He calls us beyond clannishness, nationalism, any smaller circle of love and loyalty than the great expanse of all that God has

made. It is not a matter of fitting the life of faith into the relationships we have with others; it is a matter of bringing all of our relationships into our primary call to center our lives in God and God’s love and kingdom. This is how life finds its truest, most meaningful and loving perspective.

In this Middle Eastern context the word “hate” means detachment, turning away from something in favor of something else. It does not mean emotional hostility. This passage is not a pretext for abusing or neglecting those we love. And it is not a call to self-despising. It is about priorities, what comes first and is most essential to life. Real growth, real maturity of faith and life comes by way of detachment, letting go of all else but God. It is standing on our own feet spiritually, drawing our lives first of all from God. All other loves and attachments become possessive and distorting of life if we do not have the right “distance” from others that comes from first of all loving God.

The signs of growth in life are not possessiveness and attachment but letting go and detachment. A child going off to school for the first time. Painful, yes, but a sign of health and growth. A young person entering the teen years, drawing away from parents and venturing into her own relationships and experiences. Fearful, yes, but necessary for growth. The person struggling with addiction beginning to take responsibility for his or her addictions. Very difficult, yes, but a sign of recovery and health. Leaving home, leaving behind dependencies of all kinds—these are movements toward real life, maturity, and standing on one’s own feet.

I think Jesus is saying that when we spiritually turn away from attachments and begin to work with and deepen our relationship with God, then our spiritual maturing begins. When we turn away from wanting others to tell us what to do with our lives and begin to look inward to our deepest self, seeking what God’s desire is for us. When we move beyond our need for others’ approval or agreement and live out of our own uniqueness and gifts. These are the movements of detachment from family and friends, as Jesus puts it, and attachment to God and our truest self. When we are working with this kind of spiritual growth, then our relationships with others become more fruitful, more truly loving and free. We become less demanding of others and we are not dependent upon others’ demands or their affirmations. When we let “goods and kindred go,” as Martin Luther wrote in his great hymn, and follow Jesus, he leads us into our true relationship with God, with others, with ourselves, with the world.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” What is carrying the cross? It is not what we mean when we sigh and exclaim, “Oh, I guess that’s just my cross to bear.” That’s a burden, and we certainly have those. Burdens are things that are thrust upon us by circumstances in life. A cross is different. It is the intentional life of loving with the love of God. It is a life that is always working with what it is we feel God is calling us to be and to do. It is the life of making God’s love the most important motivating force in our lives.

Sometimes it seems that selfishness and violence dominate the lives of human beings. I am amazed, however, at how many people I have known through the years who live the life of love instead of the dominant values of our culture—greed, self-interest, affluence, violence. I have known them in every church I have served and outside the church, people who live at that deeper level where the self is fulfilled not by serving itself but by giving of itself. They are Christians, Jews, Buddhist, Muslims, and those outside of formal religion. This is what I call “intentional suffering,” this cross-bearing stuff. It comes when we put ourselves out, when we take on what is uncomfortable, when we are willing to move into places of pain for the sake of love. This is the wider community I want to be part of—the community of all who love God as they understand and feel God’s call in their lives to live not for themselves but for others and the creation itself.

Then Jesus offers two little parables about knowing what we’re getting into. Here comes some very practical advice. What Jesus is inviting us into is serious, demanding, and goes against the grain of the dominant culture. It will mean our working with every attachment we have and learning to let go, to trust. It will mean being considered crazy, stupid, naïve, or disloyal. So Jesus wants us to look at what we’re getting into and to decide whether or not we are ready to work with all this stuff. And if we’re not, there seems to be no condemnation on Jesus’ part. A rich man came to Jesus wanting to know how to gain eternal life.[Mark 10:17-31] They discuss it and agree that keeping the commandments is the way. But Jesus says a further thing. The only thing you are lacking, says Jesus, is to sell everything you own, give the money to the poor and follow me. The man becomes depressed. His attachments are so strong and he turns away. The story says that Jesus looked upon him lovingly. This man counted the cost in his own life and just couldn’t do it. Jesus did not condemn him. He simply went on to

explain to his disciples that it is very difficult to enter the kingdom of God, this new life of loving God with our whole being. Jesus does not demand that people follow him or condemn them because they do not choose to do so. He doesn’t spiritually browbeat or threaten people. It is always the free invitation to freely respond. We just can’t take on such a life unless it is out of complete freedom.

This is what’s behind Covenant Membership in this church. No one makes you do it. There is always the freedom to not commit or recommit with no judgment at all. It is just part of this church’s vision way back in the early ‘50s, that the church is to be a community of those who are working with giving up everything to follow Christ, who are responding to Christ’s call to make their relationship with God the most central thing in their lives. This church has tried to place itself on that road with Jesus when he turns around and says that if we are to be his disciples then we must hate everything else and that we must take up that life of intentional suffering, the life of bearing the cross of God’s love in the world in concrete, specific actions and ways of living. And we must always be free to assess where we are in this, to take stock. Am I ready for this? Am I willing to work with this total commitment to Christ? In our own way, we try to put forth both the demands of such a life and the freedom out of which discipleship must arise.

Finally, Jesus sums up: None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. This one leaves us wondering: Where am I in this? What am I still clinging to? In what ways have I claimed to follow Jesus and continued to hold onto possessions? Possessions can really be anything—material belongings and money, people and relationships, guilt and regret, rigid ideas that prevent fresh winds of God’s spirit, habitual patterns of behavior, hanging onto the past. We try to overcome our insecurities and feelings of anxiety about life by nailing things down, clinging to one thing or another. But Jesus calls us to enter into the movement of God’s spirit, God’s redeeming activity in the world and in our own lives. In all, I think this challenging passage for today is a call from the life of possessiveness to the life of the spirit, of letting go of everything that holds us back from being part of God’s active, redeeming love.