

Sermon – September 4

Is Discipleship Even Possible?

- Mike Hickcox

Scripture: Luke 14:25-33

Good morning ...

I'm sure you've noticed we have not yet read the gospel scripture listed in the bulletin ... we'll read it soon. But first, this recognition about today's reading:

Many of the scriptures we encounter as we travel, week-by-week, through the lectionary are pleasant and supportive: "God will protect you." "Jesus loves you." And then there's that good ole Samaritan, and we think: "I would be like him!"

But some readings are just plain harsh, or confusing, or challenging, or simply don't fit our notions of what they ought to say. Today's gospel reading from Luke is one of those *tough* ones. It's not that it's a confusing reading; it's just not do-able. It leaves me out. I can't do that. There's no wiggle-room – this reading is harsh.

In Luke 14:25-33, we read of Jesus, talking to a horde of people who were energized enough by his leadership to follow after him. But he was about to weed them out. He was about to turn a horde of people into a handful of people. He was about to be harsh.

Here's today's story from Luke:

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.

Okay then – here are his criteria: to be his disciple, you have to hate your father and mother, to hate your wife and children, to hate your brothers and sisters, and also to hate life itself. You have to carry the cross and follow him ... (that means carry it where it will be used to nail you up.) Oh ... and you have to give up all your possessions.

Given those criteria, I wonder how many disciples of Jesus we have in this room. How many in this room hate all their relatives, hate life, own absolutely nothing, and are headed for crucifixion? Raise your hands ... you are disciples of Jesus.

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I tried to put this whole scenario into context. Maybe context would give this a softer edge somehow, in some way. I looked at the text that comes before this scripture, and after it, in the 14th chapter of Luke.

Frankly, this was of no help. Luke 14:25-33 is surrounded by parables ... and salt. Prior to this text, Jesus heals the man with dropsy, on the sabbath, because it needed to be done.

Then he talks about humility and hospitality: invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They can't repay you, but you'll be repaid by the good that falls upon the faithful.

That comes directly before today's scripture.

And what directly follows is this piece of wisdom: *'Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure heap; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear -- listen!'*

The stories surrounding our scripture, in the chapter where it resides, did not help me understand this reading. But searching out related scripture does give us more to work with.

Earlier in the gospel of Luke, in Chapter 12 (49-53), we find Jesus causing division in families. He says:

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.

That reading follows today's theme, as does this, in the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 10 (34-39):

'Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.

*For I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother,
and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

All these pieces of scripture say pretty much the same thing. And all of it is not only beyond our capabilities; we don't want to do them!

How do we deal with all this? Here's a suggestion ... let's just not read these any more. Let's send a suggestion to the mysterious people who put together the Revised Common Lectionary and ask them never to make us read them again!

Or we could just re-interpret: He doesn't really mean that! Our pale Jesus, meek and mild, wouldn't really make these demands. He can't really mean them. He didn't mean "sword." He didn't mean "hate." He didn't mean "die" for him.

Or did he? Did he really say such things? Did he really mean them?

In the year 27, Jesus lived in a landscape of occupation and oppression. His movement was one of faith, but it was wrapped in a volatile Middle East, with powerful forces controlling the masses, and resistance to power was regularly and repeatedly put down with blood and by death. When Jesus said you have to have all your materials ready to construct a tower, and you need all your troops ready and in sufficient number to fight a battle, he really meant he needed people fully committed and ready to go, no matter the consequence, no matter the cost.

Can you imagine the Middle East being such a place as that? Of course you can. You can tune in to any channel of reality in this world and see powerful forces pitting Palestinians against Israelis. You can see Syria torn into factions and bombs destroying entire cities and the people who lived there. You witness the crackdown in Turkey after an attempted coup.

In your mind, instead of modern-day bombs, think swords. Instead of assault rifles, think of crosses on the hill. Instead of the year 2016, think of the year 27. Jesus, too, lived in a time where nothing was guaranteed, certainly not life.

We often picture Jesus on the cross, on the hill, with common thieves on crosses on each side. You see this scene along Interstate Highways all over America ... three crosses on a hill.

This scene appeared along the highways back then, too. Escaped slaves, horse thieves, and especially enemies of the state, promptly found guilty, were sent for execution. They were crucified. Their executions were public, tortuous, long and drawn out, degrading, and humiliating. They were left to die, and then their bodies left up as an example to others – so others might not repeat what these poor people had done.

The historian, Josephus, recorded so much of what happened back then, including a reference to the early Christians. He also recorded the horrible, awesome, punishing power wielded by Greece and Rome.

These quotes are from his writings:

Antiquities 12: Chapter 5, about the invasion of Palestine by Antiochus Epiphanies c. 167 B.C.E.

And indeed many Jews there were who complied with the king's commands, either voluntarily, or out of fear of the penalty that was denounced. But the best men, and those of the noblest souls, did not regard him, but did pay a greater respect to the customs of their country than concern as to the punishment which he threatened to the disobedient; on which account they every day underwent great miseries and bitter torments; for they were whipped with rods, and their bodies were torn to pieces, and were crucified, while they were still alive and breathed.

Antiquities 17: Book 10, following the death of Herod in 4 B.C.E.

Varus sent a part of his army into the country, to seek out those that had been the authors of the revolt; and when they were discovered, he

punished some of them that were most guilty, and some he dismissed: now the number of those that were crucified on this account were two thousand.

In War 5: Chapter 6, Josephus reports that the Romans crucified many before the walls of Jerusalem during the siege of 70 C.E. – around the time the gospels were being written. The idea was to terrorize the population and force surrender. The number crucified reached 500 a day at one point until there was no wood left in the area for this purpose!

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Here is the point of all these reports of barbarities ... we're getting a view of the world in which Jesus lived. Jesus often traveled with 12 disciples. Sometimes, in the gospels, his group is numbered as 70, which is probably not a counted number; it just means a very large group. Sometimes, the scriptures mention his men were armed with swords.

Jesus was clearly working to establish a renewed relationship with God among the people. And yet, he was part of a besieged Jewish populace, overrun and ruled by Roman power. He was trying not to get caught up in the hassles between Jew and Gentile, and between populace and controlling state. And yet, he often traveled with a large group of armed men.

It was dangerous work; urgent, dangerous work. It was not for the faint-hearted. It was not for those who were worried about their families. It was not for those who had possessions to protect. It was not for those who held their lives as precious. The lives of his followers were on the line.

Would these disciples really be willing to give up everything? We have to understand the sense of urgency that exists in the face of great threat. During World War II, essentially the entire U.S. populace sacrificed. Most everyone agreed the sacrifices were for the national good for the duration of the war.

- Students, retirees, and women moved into to the workforce, and “Rosie the Riveter” helped assemble bombers.
- Work hours increased and leisure decreased.
- Most families were allotted 3 gallons of gasoline a week.
- Production of cars, housing, vacuum cleaners, and kitchen appliances was banned until the war ended.
- Meat and clothing were rationed.
- People saved.

This was sacrifice for a cause.

America later changed its mind about that sacrifice stuff. War is remote now. We don't want it to affect our lives. In 2016, 1% of the population goes to war; the cost of supporting multiple war fronts is borrowed; and what the population wants is jobs, carnival rides that don't fall apart, and according to what I see on TV, a myriad of anti-aging creams.

Donald Trump recently drew fire for his insistence that he had made sacrifices on a par with those of Khizr Khan, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention on July 28 and whose son was killed while serving in Iraq in 2004. Trump insisted that he had sacrificed by giving thousands of people jobs, by working hard, and by raising money for veterans. In actuality, most of us sit in the boat (or is it a yacht?) with Donald Trump. The vast majority of Americans have sacrificed nothing in service of the tremendous war machine the U.S. has run for the past fifteen years. This is intentional. Over the past four decades, the U.S. has chosen to build a model for the use of military force that minimizes, as much as possible, the costs that Americans must pay to deploy U.S. forces, even at war.

The point is that, in this day and age, it is increasingly hard to fathom what Jesus was talking about when he demanded a full sacrifice of your life to be his disciple. We generally don't know sacrifice like that.

My *New Revised Standard Version* Bible has a title printed above our reading for today. It says: "*The Cost of Discipleship*."

We recognize that term because it has been around for a while. *The Cost of Discipleship* is a book written by the German Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His 1937 book is considered a classic of Christian thought. It is focused on the Sermon on the Mount, and it spells out what Bonhoeffer believed it means to be a follower of Jesus. He wrote it in Germany during the rise of the Nazi regime.

One of the most quoted parts of the book explains Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace". He says:

*"cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance,
baptism without church discipline,
Communion without confession.
Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross,
grace without Jesus Christ."*

Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer says, is to hear the gospel preached like this: "*Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness.*" This preaching contains no demand for discipleship, no requirement of a change in behavior, no need to live a Godly life.

In contrast, he says: "*Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the*

contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a person to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light.'"

Bonhoeffer was condemned to death on April 8, 1945 by court-martial held in the Flossenbürg concentration camp where he was held prisoner. It was done without witnesses, records of proceedings, or a defense. He was executed there by hanging at dawn the next day, two weeks before soldiers from the United States 90th and 97th Infantry Divisions liberated the camp.

That term, "cheap grace," was coined by The Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. while he was pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church. That's a large, influential, mostly Black church in Harlem, NY. Bonhoeffer had attended that church when he was a student at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and for a season, he taught Sunday School at that church.

About fifteen years ago, I was elected president of the Religion Communicators Council at a meeting held in the sanctuary of that church. I sat in the front pew, next to the pastor, Rev. Calvin Butts. It stuns me to know Dietrich Bonhoeffer learned about the concept of "cheap grace" while sitting in those same pews.

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Mahatma Gandhi once said that seven things have the ability to destroy us. He said the antidotes to each of these are natural principals and laws that govern a worthwhile life. One of those seven things was *Religion without Sacrifice* ... our issue today.

Stephen Covey was an American educator, author, businessman, and keynote speaker. His most popular book was *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. In one of his books, he reflected on Gandhi's list. On the subject of religion without sacrifice, Covey says:

Without sacrifice, we may become active in a church, but remain inactive in its gospel. In other words, we go for the social facade of religion and the piety of religious practices. But there is no real walking with people, or going the second mile, or trying to deal with our social problems that may eventually undo our economic system. It takes sacrifice to serve the needs of other people - the sacrifice of our own pride and prejudice, among other things.

If a church or religion is seen as just another hierarchical system, its members won't have a sense of service or inner worship. Instead, they will be into outward observances and all the visible accoutrements of religion. But they are neither God-centered, nor principle-centered.

All this, I think, brings us – finally - to where we can read today's scripture with understanding. This is where we learn what we can do, so maybe, just maybe, we can raise our hands and say we are disciples of Jesus.

This is not the year 27; it is 2016.

This is not Jerusalem. This is Lynchburg, USA.

Rome is not oppressing us. And yet, there is oppression in the land.

Jesus' battle was not one against powers and principalities. His battle was against injustice. While he travelled with men with swords, he trained his troops to fight with prayer, and love, and compassion, and equality.

Victory was not land and spoils, but was justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Our challenge is this: to recognize where there is injustice; to see where there is suffering; to learn where corruption exists. And then we must make a commitment of ourselves and our resources to make a real difference.

What can we do to feed the hungry; to provide a secure footing to the poor; to educate the children; to comfort the homeless; to give hope to those whose lives, because of poverty or addiction or disaster, seem to have no meaning?

This remains a challenge. We still want jobs, and safe carnival rides, and anti-aging creams – and good homes, and cars, and security. And yet, there is that call to do more to be a disciple of Jesus.

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In talking with people about computer issues, I often point out that – no matter how much you already know about computers and programs and code – you’re always standing right at the far edge of what you do know, looking out at the vast world of what you don’t know.

It’s much the same with our faith challenge today. No matter what you are doing to make a difference, you always stand at the edge, where you can see all the unanswered needs that you are not touching with your life. That’s a vast and hopeless scene.

And this is where Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps us out: *“costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus; it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a person to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: ‘My yoke is easy and my burden is light.’”*

Both Bonhoeffer and Jesus himself reflect the challenge declared by the prophet Micah (6:8):

And what does the LORD require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

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I can't raise my hand to *claim* I'm a disciple of Jesus. I'm not doing enough. The needs are so great; and what I do is so little. I don't merit the title of *disciple of Jesus*. I stand at the edge of what I am doing and I look out at all that needs to be done. I feel small.

When we read today's scripture, we hear Jesus calling on his disciples to separate themselves from everything and anything they love in this life, in order to be ready to sacrifice all that they have left – and all they have left is their lives. He needs all the resources he can muster to build the tower, to fight the battle, to bring the people into a full relationship with God. If he didn't have that commitment from his followers, he didn't have enough.

And that's the real question raised by today's scripture: Today, in our lives, what *is* enough?

We are called upon to look at our lives, and to determine where we can sacrifice, to give of ourselves and our lives, to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. We need to be God-centered and principle-centered. Are – we – doing - that?

I trust that when we die, if we have done these things ... if we have been God-centered, if we have done justice, if we have loved kindness, then, perhaps – according to the prophet Micah, and to Rev. Adam Clayton Powell, and to Mahatma Gandhi, and to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and maybe even to Jesus - we *will have been* disciples.

With God's help, may it be so.