

“Costly Discipleship” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
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So let’s take a minute and be sure we heard that right: according to Jesus we cannot follow him unless we are willing to remain completely un-nested, allow our parents and grandparents to die alone, and basically turn our backs on our families forever once we’ve been taken up as his disciples. Perhaps this is a little presumptuous, but if Jesus were in charge of a congregation there would have been about four people left after he preached that sermon. And they would have been the ones who’d been texting while he was preaching – missed the whole thing. Just imagine His newcomer greeting on a Sunday with that kind of message at its heart: “Those of you who are new to Grace or visiting us today? You need to know this straight up: This way of life will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. You need to be willing to let go of it all. And by the way if you succeed at this – if you really do follow me – it will probably get you killed. So, why don’t you go home and think it over. I would hate for you to get in over your head.” The peace of the Lord be always with you? It would never fly.

And not only do these words work against an initially “welcoming model of being church,” they’re not exactly in line with what we would call some of the core basic pastoral teachings of the church either. Aren’t we supposed to honor our fathers and mothers? Commanded in fact to do just that? Aren’t we supposed to care for the dying, faithfully mourn the dead and create homes that are loving, safe and full of a holy kind of nurture? Wouldn’t we call all of those things our faithful work and ministry?

So what’s going on here? Has Jesus lost it? He had people lining up to follow him, they were coming out of the word work in order simply to touch him, crawling out of the dark corners of society in order to experience His light and they were surrounding him at every turn,

presumably bubbling with enthusiasm about becoming His disciples. But Jesus is less than welcoming; it's not quite a cold shoulder but it's not a warm fuzzy either. In this gospel passage he told his prospects not to get their hopes up and suggested that they think about this discipleship business long and hard before they took any sort of leap, that they considered the costs before they decided to go with him, and like us I would guess that a bunch of them were puzzled by his response.

Because they all wanted to be with him and they had been hearing buzz words like healing and love and unexpected hospitality. They wanted to get as close to Him as they possibly could, to hear his teaching, share in the feasts, be healed and help heal others. They wanted to change the world with him because they saw grace in his very presence, but truth is, (Jesus knew) they had no idea what all of that could cost. Not "cost" in terms of purchasing something exactly. Not "cost" in terms of paying this in order to receive that. But "cost" in terms of sacrifice. They would necessarily lose some things, and have to intentionally let go of some things along the way. And because Jesus loved them he wanted them to know that because the worst thing he could do would be to mislead them. Jesus had set his mind and heart and feet toward Jerusalem and he knew it was going to be a hard road ahead. And by the time Luke wrote this gospel, he knew about the hard road too . By the time this gospel was written Christians were being persecuted for following Jesus. To have a Christian in the family was dangerous for everyone, so it really was true, literally true that turning toward Jesus meant turning away from ones family, potentially sacrificing ones family, whether they wanted to or not. Once you made Jesus your first priority, everything else fell by the wayside. And know that wasn't because God took it away but because that was and often is how the world works. Bottom line is that the world opposes those who set out to transform it; we can each make our own lists of martyrs for varieties of historical and present day good gospel causes. The transformers, redeemers always pay a high price. This side of heaven, it works that way.

And I think that's what Jesus wanted them and wants us to know. He's not threatening us in this passage, nor is he trying to scare us away, he's loving us, refusing to lie to us, refusing to make the way sound easier than it really is. He wants everyone to know that there are costs, sacrifices that have to be made along the way and he wants us to know this so that no one follows under false pretenses. Jesus may not have made a great church growth expert but he made a very good and honest savior, and as intimidating as it still can be, truth is that the cross was one of his tools. Not because God wanted us to suffer but because God wanted us to know that even underneath something that heavy, there is hope and there is peace and there is love. In the end even suffering itself can pale next to the redemption that flows through it, through those who are willing to put themselves, their whole selves in its path.

It's not for everyone. Which is what Jesus is saying here. There aren't a whole lot of people who have what it takes to willingly shoulder the cross but part of what happens is that when you take it up, even a little piece of it, you notice that there are other shoulders there with yours, sharing the burden, and that Jesus is there too doing something amazing. He's creating a family of those who are learning to love like he did, making brothers and sisters of us all. Jesus is there already caring for the dying and the lost and the broken. Jesus is there making the kind of home that unlike any nest we could muster will last into eternity.

And if we shoulder that cross in the dark corners of our world there will be a new kind of loving light that breaks forth; if we look beneath the woodwork ourselves and stand by the cross with those who have been bound there, we just might discover that there is room for us all in its embrace. Amen.