

The Call to Follow Jesus

As we hear Jesus say that in order to follow him, we must hate our relatives and even life itself, we are all sort of taken aback, aren't we?

We must really be careful to interpret and put His words in context lest we misunderstand Him. In saying that one must hate our relatives and even life itself in order to be his follower, like all good communicators, Jesus was overstating himself to make a point. The grammatical term for it is hyperbole which simply means that Jesus was exaggerating. How do we know that He was exaggerating? We know that because we know Him.

Jesus is the God of love. Why, He even commands us to love our enemies for goodness' sake or actually for His sake. Therefore, when He says that we must hate in order to be committed to Him, He is talking about the radical call of God which is "to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts, with all of our souls and with all of our minds". The idea that Jesus is teasing out here is that our love for God should be so great and so absolute that by comparison, our love for anyone else or anything else would be like hate.

Isn't it also true that it is only in loving God radically that we can really love others the way we want to? For as we learn to love God above all others and above all things, then God's great love engulfs us and we are able to love others completely, yes even our enemies, for Jesus' sake.

So, let's not go home today and tell the members of our families that we hate them because Jesus said to. That is NOT His point. Rather, let's

try to go home loving God with all of ourselves so that we can really and truly love those around us unconditionally as God loves us. Surely, that's the first point that Jesus' makes in the Gospel for today.

2. The second statement that Jesus makes is that if someone is not willing to carry the cross and follow Him, that person cannot be His disciple.

I am sticking with that definition that I read in a children's homily a while back regarding what carrying the cross means. The children's homily said that carrying the cross or taking up the cross means to do what is right even when it's hard...to do what's right even when it's hard. To follow Jesus even when it's hard.

Doing what is right even when it's hard involves standing where Christ would have us stand, even when it's hard. Perhaps this week it's not about standing. This week, it may be about kneeling. This week, we join our prayers with the other peacemakers in the world and pray for a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria. We pray for the leaders of our nation and for the leaders of Syria and the leaders of the nations throughout the world. We pray for a way forward to ensure human rights and protection for people without having to resort to violence.

Of course, God does have that other bias that we find throughout Scripture, God's bias toward the poor and the sick and the marginalized. That is another place Jesus stands and calls us to stand with him, with the poor, the sick and the marginalized. Bringing the Kingdom of God there means actively doing what we can to see that people have the necessities of life, clean water, food, shelter and medical care, both at home and abroad.

I guess it also means standing against all of the isms that breed prejudice in the hearts of human beings like us, isms like racism and sexism and all the other isms that divide people rather than unite them. Speaking of uniting them, if you haven't seen the movie "I am", I would commend it to you. We saw it as a Vestry when it was in the theatres. It is a movie that emphasizes all that we have in common, and what the world might be like if we come together rather than remain separated by all of the things that separate us. It is out on Netflix and I am sure on DVD as well. If anyone would like to watch it together, we could schedule a showing here at Grace and then spend some time talking about it. Let me know if you'd like to do this.

So, point two, in order to follow Jesus, we must be willing to carry the cross which we might define as doing what is right even when it's hard.

Jesus then told two parables about counting the cost of following Him. He seemed to be saying that He didn't want everyone jumping on the Jesus Bandwagon without first very carefully counting the cost. This is not the only place where Jesus talks like this in the Gospels. He is underscoring the fact that following Him is such a radical commitment that one needs to think very carefully about it before agreeing to follow Him, because it is not easy. It is life giving, and it is the path of joy, but there is also a great cost to following Him. In fact, it costs us all that we have and all that we are, doesn't it?

We remember that day when so many had counted the cost of following Jesus and were turning back, He said to His disciples, "Aren't you going away, too?" And they replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

Indeed, Jesus has the words of eternal life. And so, here we are together on this path of life and joy and hardship, of peace and of persecution in the Holy Spirit.

We don't follow Jesus because it makes life easier, do we? No, we follow Jesus because He is Love, because He is God. We don't escape the difficulties of life because we are His followers. Indeed, sometimes we are called to follow Him right into the middle of difficulties for His sake. I think of all of the people who made the trek to Raleigh on the recent Moral Mondays, many of which were arrested.

The people that I know who went down there assured me that it was not about politics. It was not about this political party or that one. Rather, they said it was about protesting against the legislation that our state leadership has enacted that is going to make life even harder for the poor and the sick and the marginalized, for those people that God seems to be so concerned about in the Scriptures. If we are going to follow Jesus, we need to search the Scriptures daily and pray for an understanding of what is right and wrong, and then stand for what is right, despite the cost to us.

As God's people, we know that we are not protected from harm. We get hurt and injured and sick just like everyone else. But, whatever we suffer in this life, our Lord is right there with us in our suffering. Jesus promised to be with us always, to the end of the age, and we rejoice in that promise and know that we know that we know that He is with us, right there with us, right here with us, when we are infirm in any way or grieving or hurting or sad. He is not only with us, but because He

became human, He knows exactly what it is like. We know that Jesus is no stranger to suffering.

The final thing that Jesus says in today's gospel is, "None of you can be my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions." Now, again, Jesus gave us minds to think with. Does he really mean that he expects all of his followers throughout the world to give up all their possessions? Does He mean that literally, that we are to give away all that we own? He can't possibly mean that, can he?

Elsewhere in the Bible, we see people living in families, in households, with roofs over their heads, with jobs to make a living for their families.

Jesus must have been cautioning His followers about being possessed by their possessions. Who possesses what? Or what possesses whom? Do we possess our possessions, or are they possessing us? Surely, this was the question that Jesus was asking people to consider.

In this Gospel scenario of radical commitment to God that Jesus is describing in our Gospel for today, He seems to be saying something like, "when we throw in with God, where our possessions are concerned, and where our whole lives are concerned if the truth be told, He expects us to try and give all of ourselves to God. That must have been what Jesus meant in the Gospel reading for today.

God wants all of us, and to the extent to which we give God all of us, that is the extent to which we will be fulfilled in this life. God, give us the grace to give it all, all of our selves, all of our possessions, all of us into your hands O Lord. AMEN.