

The Cost of Discipleship is the title of a book by German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In it, Bonhoeffer spells out what he believes it means to follow Christ, what discipleship really is all about. Bonhoeffer understood that following Jesus is not always easy. He wanted to honestly communicate the message that, if you live into a life of discipleship, there will be costs to living such a life. And, ultimately, toward the end of World War II, Bonhoeffer was killed because of the choices he made and his commitment to faithfully follow Jesus.

In our gospel reading for today, we find Jesus bluntly teaching about **discipleship** and what it means to follow him. And, I have to say, his words regarding discipleship are daunting and uncomfortable to hear. Today, we find Jesus speaking to a large crowd of people. Among the throng, there were some who were contemplating the possibility of becoming disciples. Jesus' response to them communicates the seriousness of discipleship and his words make it clear that faithful discipleship is not for the faint of heart.

The stakes have been rising throughout this chapter in Luke, and it is becoming ever more clear just what lies ahead as Jesus faces the future. So, Jesus spells out the high **cost** of discipleship. To better understand the

blunt nature of what he is saying, think about this. Just imagine inviting someone to come and be part of our community of faith and saying to them, “Come and check us out this Sunday and we’ll tell you how hard it is to join our church. First, you’ve got to hate your family. Then, you must carry a cross like a condemned criminal. Along with that, we expect you to give up everything you have worked so hard to possess. **Do** these things and you can call yourself a member of our community of Faith.” Now, that sounds like a sure and certain way to grow a church! Right?

Well, I think we need to unpack what Jesus is saying and take a deep dive into exploring the meaning of this passage. First, Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” Now, most of us, when we think of Jesus, usually connect his message to themes of love and **not** hate. “Hate” is such a strong word and it seems contradictory to our understanding of the Christian life. And, in our nation, a culture that often elevates “family values” by placing them higher than almost anything else, the idea of hating family is offensive.

When unpacking this word, pastor and theologian, John Petty, writes:

The word "hate" is laden with emotion in our cultural context. It suggests repulsion at a visceral level. In this case, in the context of first century middle eastern culture, to "hate" [one's family or] one's own self means that the person disconnects from everything that has

heretofore **defined** that person. To put it another way, **one's past no longer defines who they are**. One's identity is no longer formed by one's former allegiances, nor one's experiences in life, nor even one's genetics. These are part of the old world which is giving way to the new world of God. Followers of Jesus are **not** defined by the past, but by their work in the **present** and their **future hope**.

Jesus uses hyperbole to get across the seriousness of what it means to follow him. Jesus understands the transformation that takes place in the life of a disciple. Once a person decides to follow Jesus, then life, relationships, time, and possessions are all viewed through the lens of Jesus. Even family relationships pale in comparison to our relationship with God. Our relationship to God is our first priority and our ultimate concern.

Yes, Jesus' words are surprising and daunting. But he is not yet finished. He continues saying, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Well, this demand had to hit some of the people like a ton of bricks and take their breath away. It is likely some of them had witnessed the public shame and humiliation of a condemned criminal carrying his cross through the city streets to the place of execution, just as Jesus himself would eventually do.

Quite honestly, we hear so much about the cross and cross bearing that I don't think we are able to always grasp what Jesus is saying. In fact, the language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a

cross has nothing to do with things we often reference like living with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do *voluntarily*, because of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. And, this commitment is not just a way of life, it is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life. [Luke, New Interpreter's Bible, p. 293]

It is interesting to note that the term for "cost" appears only **once** in the New Testament, and it is in this passage. When Jesus talks about the cross and the **cost** of discipleship, he gets down to the meat and potatoes of what following him really is about. The cost inevitably has to do with what you give up, what you sacrifice, what you deny, and the choices you make.

Life is always full of choices. Life is about counting and weighing the cost of the many things, events and opportunities that vie for our attention. Sporting events, family events, work events, the list is endless. But, to carry your cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a **certain commitment** to living into and bringing forth the Kingdom of God right here and right now. That's certainly what it meant for Jesus. When commenting on this, theologian, David Lose, writes:

Jesus isn't inviting meaningless sacrifice. He isn't inviting door-mat discipleship or a whiney Christianity ("that's just my cross to bear"). Rather, he's inviting us to a full-bodied Christian faith that stands over and against all those things that are often presented to us as life by the culture. Jesus invites us, that is, to the kind of abundant life that is discovered only as you give yourself away. The kingdom of God Jesus proclaims is about **life** and **love**. And just as love is one thing that only **grows** when it's given away, so also is genuine and abundant life.... The choices we make, the relationships we decide to pursue, the way we spend this life we've been given, may cause not just puzzlement but dissatisfaction, even upset, among those we care about. But the question before us, as put so fiercely by Moses in the first reading, is whether we will choose life or death.

Well, after Jesus says these things, and being the consummate teacher that he is, he then uses two parables to emphasize his point. First, he describes building a tower and the process used to build it. Using a form of cost-benefit analysis, he says, "A wise person estimates the cost. Is it worth it? Can I complete it? In the same manner, a wise ruler calculates the cost of the war before going into battle. Is it worth it? Can I complete the war?"

Our vocation and call as disciples is **always** played out in our daily lives by the **choices we make**. The decision-making process often requires an aspect of cost-benefit analysis, and sometimes choosing **life** – life that truly matters – is **very** costly. As my dear friend Bill Uetracht says, "To follow Jesus, you have to count the cost. It isn't going to be easy. It's going to take you to some uncomfortable places. It is going to challenge

some basic assumptions you have about life. It is going to unsettle all your little pet projects.” Yes, it will unsettle you and unsettle all your pet projects! However, we weigh our choices in light of the gift of love and grace God has given us. And, for those who hear a call to discipleship, Jesus himself becomes the sorting principle – Jesus, the embodiment of self-giving love, of mercy and compassion, the one who is our “true north.”

We follow the one who loved this world so much he went to the cross. Following Jesus is not easy, but His word is still the **best** news this world has ever heard for bad times or good, and that is what you and I are called to remember **together**. Discipleship is demanding. Discipleship is very rewarding, and it is a joy filled experience. Discipleship is also an intentional, determined thing – an intentional choice. If you would follow Jesus, come with all that you are and with all you have. The promise of life, abundant life, life that truly matters, is always in front of us. And, the promise of God’s unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace far **outweigh whatever** the cost discipleship might bring. May God’s love free us to choose **life** and daily center our lives in Christ, beginning right here and right now.