

“Just Say No to Cheap Grace”

I wonder how many of us here today have ever been homeless? If you have not been homeless yourself perhaps you know someone who has been. There are lots of ways in which someone becomes homeless. I expect when I say the word homeless it conjures an image of someone living on the street or under a bridge or in an encampment. We might also think of someone who is poorly dressed, pushing a shopping cart with all of their possessions in it, or someone who is hooked on drugs, is mentally ill, or has a criminal record. These images are certainly the most desperate of those who fall into the category of homeless.

Another version of homelessness is someone who may have a job, a car, and a phone, but due to circumstances is between residences. I have been homeless in that way a couple of times in my life. They seemed unavoidable because of rapid changes in life circumstances. I did not tell my friends or the people I worked with about my situation. I just made do until I could find a place to hang my hat. Despite it not being as dramatic and life altering as the type of homelessness I first described, there was shame, trepidation, and uncertainty. There was also worry about when I would find a place and what I could afford.

Imagine if you will a third way of being homeless—by choice. Our first reaction might be one of disgust for such a bad decision, confusion about why one would make that choice, or disregard for someone so irresponsible. Yet what Jesus reminds us of in today’s reading is that he made the decision to become a homeless itinerant preacher, teacher and healer. In response to a person who begged to follow Jesus he says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Out of context this sounds kind of whiny and pitiful, as if Jesus were singing that Linda Ronstadt song “Poor, Poor Pitiful Me”¹ but I do not think that is how Jesus meant it.

Rather Jesus is telling the volunteer disciple about something I discussed in last week’s sermon, the cost of discipleship. Jesus is telling those who want to be his followers there is more to discipleship than the apparent glory of following a renowned and powerful teacher. There is much one has to give up in order to be a true follower of Christ. For one person it might be the security of a home, a good bed, family, regular meals or simply having an address.

When Jesus calls another man to follow him the man asks first to go bury his father. Jesus does not deny the commandment to honor father and mother, but rather he is telling the man that family too may have to be released in order to follow the way of Jesus. Remember Jesus’ family thought he was out of his mind and wanted to take him away. Jesus said in that instance that his family was made of those who followed him.

Similarly, another man calls out to follow Jesus, but first he wants to say goodbye to those at home. Jesus tells him that one cannot look back when his hand is on the plow. That is a reference to Elisha in Second Kings, and also a practical point that if one is looking backward instead of forward when driving a

¹ “Poor, Poor Pitiful Me,” words and music by Warren Zevon, 1976

plow, the furrow will not be straight and true. Remember how Jesus' first disciples dropped everything they were doing and "immediately" followed him. They did not look back to their former life when Jesus called them.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* makes a strong distinction between what he calls "cheap grace" and "costly grace."² 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, it is grace without the incarnate Jesus Christ.

Cheap grace is feel good religion. Bonhoeffer says that such preachers would say: "Of course you have sinned, but now everything is forgiven, so you can stay as you are and enjoy the consolations of forgiveness." Such preachers like to get their congregations energized into frenzies of excitement through shouting and Bible pounding like hucksters. When all is said and done if you ask a congregant to recall something of substance and they cannot. It is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."³

In contrast, 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 us 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."

You see the difference? There is a requirement to make changes in our lives to follow Jesus. We have to give up things and people that seem important to us. We have to give up the status quo. To save our life we have to lose it to Jesus and the mission God gives us to love extravagantly, faithfully, unreservedly, and indiscriminately. It is a hard job because it goes against our desire for the easy way out.

Jesus calls us to be yoked to him like one of Elisha's oxen. We are to pull with Jesus plowing the fields of the Lord, planting the seed, tending the crop, and harvesting it all in good time. It requires determination, work and diligence.

Don't settle for cheap grace because it does no one any good. Strive for the grace that changes you and changes others. Strive for the grace that looks like the work of Jesus and his disciples. Strive for grace that has the power to change the world and bring us closer to the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. No one of us can do it all, but if we follow Jesus in love each and every day how we live will change us and those around us in ways that we can neither ask nor imagine. For with God nothing is impossible.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, [Greenwich: Touchstone, 1995]

³ William Shakespeare, "Macbeth"