

“Counting Costs”

I am sure that we can all remember as a child being angry at our parents. It was probably over something trivial in the scheme of things, but at that moment it meant everything in the world. It could have been about playing with a friend, having a special toy or treat, or watching a television show. In our fury we would stomp off to our room saying something like “I hate you. You **never** let me do anything. I am going to eat worms and die. Then you will be sorry.” In that moment we were furious with our parents that we thought we hated them, but nothing could have been further from the truth. We probably did not have the words for it at the time, but what we were expressing was hyperbole. Our emotions were over the top and we were using the only words that our 8-year-old vocabulary had.

Even adults are subject to this. There was a couple who had a knock down drag out argument. It was not physical, but a war of words and emotions. The next morning as the wife headed off to work she left her husband a note on the kitchen table that read, “I cannot believe I married such a pigheaded, small minded dope as you. I hate you. Love, Karen.” Yes, even educated, articulate, emotionally mature adults can be so angry and frustrated that they go for hyperbole to make a point.

In today’ gospel reading when Jesus says, “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.” Jesus is using hyperbole to get across to his disciples, the crowd, and also you and me his point is that there is a profound cost to following Jesus. We have to be prepared to put aside everything that we think is important in order to follow Jesus.

You may remember a few weeks ago we heard the scripture where Jesus said,

“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; they will be divided:
father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”¹

As he did in that instance, Jesus uses the family as a point of reference for the cost. He is telling us that the cost of following him could be so high that we lose our family. No longer will blood lineage be the most important building block of society, but rather it will be the willingness to take up our cross and follow him.

Hyperbole or shock value, whatever you call it, he is trying to get our attention. He is trying to wake us out of the torpor of the status quo. Israel/Palestine has been under Roman rule for almost one hundred years. The people have been ground down into complacency. The Temple is ruled by a coopted group of Sadducees and scribes who are more interested in keeping power in the Temple than serving the people. Life is like something out of a Sartre or Camus. Jesus is trying to get the people to realize to realize there is another option, but first he has to get their attention.

¹ Luke 12:49-56 NRSV

Strangely it seems to me, Jesus segues into a discussion of counting costs. He talks of a builder who must plan carefully or otherwise be ridiculed. He discusses a king who acts prudently in the face of an overwhelming enemy. Like the builder who cannot finish the tower, it is better not to start than to only partially complete the task and then become a laughing stock. Or we should be like the king and shrewdly sue for peace rather than be overwhelmed by our opponent. It seems at first that he is saying that if we cannot afford to follow him then we should back off.

But then he adds the line, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” The examples are not about weighing the cost of following Jesus; rather it is about getting rid of anything that would hold us back. Unyoke ourselves from our burdens and our liabilities.

If we are hindered from following Jesus by possessions or family ties we need to break with them. There is a cost to any change. Being the disciple of the Son of God may have the greatest cost of all.

Of course, there are many rewards for following Jesus. There is peace of mind and heart. There is connection to the source of all life and creation. There is knowing that Jesus walks with us through our greatest trials and triumphs. Possessions are of no comfort or solace when we despair. People, even those we trust and love, can be fickle in their love. But, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Lutheran pastor, theologian, and martyr wrote,

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: 'Ye were bought at a price', and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”²

We have much to be thankful for in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But if we live our lives as if grace freely given is free, we are fooling ourselves. We must accept that the grace we receive requires much of us. It requires more than complacency, more than paying lip service to a creed, or more than money in the plate. God’s grace requires that we live lives worthy of that grace, worthy of the Lamb that was slain, and worthy of God’s love. It requires that we follow Jesus to the best of our ability, asking God for forgiveness when we sin and then amending our lives the best we can. In the words of the poet Mary Oliver

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?³

Jesus says use “your one wild and precious life” and follow me. There you will find the fullness and purpose you seek.

² *The Cost of Discipleship*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

³ “The Summer Day” by Mary Oliver, ©1992.