

Meditation for Pentecost 13, Year C

Luke 14:25-35

Today's Gospel lesson may be one of the most difficult ones in the Bible. Jesus makes two statements to introduce these two parables about being a disciple. First He says whoever does not hate the people closest to them cannot be His disciple. And then He says that whoever does not bear his own cross cannot be His disciple. Finally, after telling two parables about "counting the cost" of discipleship, He says that unless a person renounces all that he has, he cannot be one of His disciples.

If we hear Jesus' words out of context, and without knowing about His other teachings, we might think He means that we must literally hate our parents and other family members, and that only those who do so can be His disciples. Obviously, that doesn't even agree with the fourth Commandment in which we are told to honor our father and mother—nor does it agree with Jesus' own teaching in Mark 7:9-12 when he says to the Pharisees: *"You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, 'Whatever you would have gained from me is [given to God]'" then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition...."* It's obvious that Jesus would not make the word of God void by advocating disobedience to the commandment!

And then there's the matter of "renouncing" all that one has. It is true that Jesus told the rich man in Mark 10:21 to sell all that he had and give it to the poor, but it's also the case that when the healed demoniac in Mark 5:19 wanted to follow Jesus, he was told to go home, and to tell his neighbors there what Jesus had done for him. Jesus often visited at the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany, and there is no record of his telling them to sell everything in order to be his disciples. So just what is Jesus saying about being a disciple?

When Jesus told these parables He was on the way to Jerusalem. He had many casual followers in addition to the twelve disciples and other disciples who were not numbered among the twelve. Some of those who followed Him were folks

who were just curious about this rabbi who could perform miracles. Like those who were fed with the five loaves and two fish in the wilderness, many of these people simply wanted to be in line to reap some benefit from Jesus the “miracle worker”. Then there were disciples who were more committed to Him than that, but who thought He had come to bring in the new earthly kingdom that they believed would be the fulfillment of God’s promise to King David—a Messiah (or “anointed one”) who would sit on David’s throne. Even Jesus’ twelve closest disciples fell into this temptation as we know from the request of James and John to have special places of honor at Jesus’ right hand and left hand when He gained His kingdom. We’re also told that the other disciples were angry when they heard that James and John had made this request. Everyone around Jesus wanted to be first in line to reap some benefit from this “soon-to-be” king of the restored nation of Israel!

Jesus knew that people didn’t really “get it”. They didn’t understand what He came into the world to do, or what his kingdom was actually all about. Even when they got his title right—as Peter did when he said in Matthew 16:16, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,*”—they didn’t realize what that title meant. They were focused on the idea of a king like David. They thought this journey to Jerusalem, the seat of political power in Palestine, was to bring in a new government with the nation of Israel free from the domination of Roman power.

Jesus’ harsh words about hating parents, taking up a cross, and renouncing earthly possessions were a wake-up call for those who followed Him and thought they were going to gain status and reap rewards in this new government. Loyalty to Jesus was a dangerous thing that required a total commitment—not a cushy job that made one rich and powerful according to the world’s standards. Nothing could be allowed to stand in the way of Jesus’ commitment to His heavenly Father or to the fulfillment of the Father’s will. Jesus was going to the cross, and His followers needed to understand the dangers—to Jesus *and* to those who claimed Him as their Lord.

Those who wanted to follow Jesus needed to know what that meant, and they needed to “count the cost”. Anyone who put family loyalty or personal gain above their commitment to Christ would not be able to survive the rigors of the

journey to Jerusalem. This journey wasn't about political power or favors granted to half-hearted supporters. It was about death and life—the death of Jesus whom they expected to mount the throne and wear the crown of earthly power. And beyond their wildest imaginings, it was about Jesus' resurrection to eternal life and His gift of that LIFE to His disciples. Jesus' kingdom stretches beyond the boundaries of time and place, and His power transcends the limitations of the physical realm. He came to be King of kings and Lord of lords.

Being a disciple of Jesus, now as in the first century, doesn't mean we quit living in the world.

- It doesn't mean we reject our families or those who misunderstand our Lord or disagree with our beliefs.
- It *does* mean that we live simultaneously in the physical world of things and in the eternal world of God's kingdom.
- It also means that our first loyalty is to Christ—the King of kings, and Lord of lords.
- It means that we don't put ultimate meaning in the fleeting concerns of this world that will one day pass away.
- It means that when choices are to be made, Jesus comes first—not our own ideas or desires.

The apostle Paul suffered much for the sake of Christ and his life is the finest example of what Jesus taught about the cost of discipleship. From the time of his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul never quit sharing the news of Jesus' death and resurrection and what that meant for the way we are to live as God's people in the world. He suffered much for his Lord—beatings, imprisonment, shipwrecks and abuse. He renounced all earthly honor and gain for the privilege of knowing Christ. (Remember, he was a Pharisee before his conversion—a man who was respected and honored by those in power.) In Philippians 3, many years after his conversion, Paul wrote these words: *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him....”*

Amen.

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