

Pentecost 13, September 4, 2022 (Lk 14:25-33, 35a; Dt 30:15-20; Ps 1; Phi)

If today's gospel doesn't cause you some serious concerns, I have to ask, were you really paying attention? These words *chilled* me the first time I read them as a pastor. Three times Jesus said, **You cannot be my disciple if you don't . . .**

If you don't hate your family, and even life itself, **you cannot be my disciple.** If you don't carry the cross and follow me, **you cannot be my disciple.** If you don't give up all your possessions, **you cannot be my disciple.**

According to Jesus' words, I can never be a disciple! No matter how I look at these verses, when they stand by themselves they paint a bleak picture of my relationship to Jesus.

Look at the first scenario, about hating your family. In Hebrew the word *hate* isn't nearly as strong as it is in English. I truly *hate* the evil of drunk driving, and the fact that for repeat offenders the penalty is hardly more than a slap on the wrist.

I *hate* any kind of abuse that takes advantage of someone or something less powerful. I *hate* the use of economic, social, or political power that makes pawns of individuals.

But the Hebrew word translated *hate* in our text means "to turn away, to detach yourself from." Jesus was really saying, if your attachment to your family is stronger than your love for me, then **you can't be my disciple.** In fact, if you love your own life more than you love me, **you can't be my disciple.**

How about the second test of discipleship, taking up the cross? This image has been misused a lot in our time. *Bearing a cross* doesn't mean putting up with a chronic illness, a bad job, or a painful relationship. It doesn't mean you grin and bear it when someone takes advantage of you, or abuses you, or treats you with contempt.

Bearing the cross of Jesus refers to what *we choose to do* as a consequence of our commitment to Christ. It's a deliberate sacrifice of our own comfort and security, sometimes even of our position or reputation. We can't follow Jesus in any other way.

The third thing Jesus said is probably the hardest for most of us. **You cannot be my disciple if you don't give up all your possessions.**

How are we supposed to understand these words? If all Christians gave up all their possessions, we'd all be on welfare, burdening the rest of the world. Surely *that* can't be what Jesus meant, can it?

I, for one, fail all three tests. So I'm very thankful to Martin Luther for his understanding that *scripture interprets scripture*. When we can't make sense of something in the Bible, we look at it from the perspective of *its own context* and *the rest of the Bible*.

Today's reading from Deuteronomy helps us understand what being faithful to God looked like in the centuries before Christ.

Choose life! Moses says. Love the Lord your God, walk in his ways, follow the things he tells you—**then you shall live**. Then you'll do well, because the Lord's ways are holy, and beneficial to you.

So far so good. **But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, then I declare to you today that you shall perish.**

It sounds harsh: do what God says, or you'll die. And what God says in the Old Testament makes up 613 laws, statutes, commands, and ordinances. Obey all these and you'll live. Rebel against God, and you'll die.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and say I suspect most Christians today don't *rebel against God*. We don't deliberately break his commandments. We simply don't think about them much.

Most of us have grown up in the Christian church, and our religion is just a part of our life. Most of you come to church on Sundays and pray before meals, and sometimes at bedtime. Your children are baptized and in Sunday School, and Jesus is your Lord.

This is where it gets tough. This is *why* it gets tough. You've probably never had to *choose* to be a Christian. You've never been faced with that life-or-death choice Moses offered the people of Israel. Christianity is something you've taken for granted all your life. You know Jesus died for you, so he's your Lord.

The Good News for all Christians is that Jesus was asked to make a choice, and he chose, not life for himself, but death, so that *all people* might have life.

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He was asked to carry the cross, to Golgotha, Calvary—the cross on which *our sins* were nailed to death. He was asked to give up not all his *possessions*, but his very *life*, so that *we* might enjoy life everlasting.

What *we* can't do—hate life, carry our cross, and give up all our possessions—those things *Jesus* did on our behalf. Not so *we* don't have to attempt these goals of discipleship, but so that when *we* fail—as *we* all do—God will overlook our faults and shortcomings for the sake of Jesus.

This is what it means to be a faithful disciple: to do our best, then trust in God's forgiveness and mercy when *we* fail.

Thanks be to God!