

Disciples Take Faith Seriously

Part 1 of Sermon Series:

What Disciples Do

a sermon based on

Luke 14:25-33

(with Jeremiah 18:1-11)

and delivered on

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at

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That was a happy Gospel reading. Wasn't it? {sarcasm} "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." (Lk 14:26) Obviously, Jesus didn't take a marketing class in Hebrew school.

Does this passage bother any of you? What about the passage from Jeremiah? "Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings." (Jer. 18:11) How do you like that one?

These are not the Scriptures I would pick to read in church to encourage people. They're not, but there they are in Scripture – the words of a prophet and a speech from the Son of God himself. Must be something that we need to hear. That's why I follow the lectionary (the assigned readings for any given Sunday) it compels me to tackle some of the more challenging passages of Scripture. We don't get to pick and choose which parts of the Bible that we will listen to. Well, we do... unless we take our faith seriously.

So let's do that. Let's take our faith seriously, and meet today's Scripture head on, because there actually is good news in what Jeremiah conveys on behalf of the Lord. There is good news in what Jesus is saying.

First, we need to acknowledge that when Jesus says we must hate our parents, spouse, children and siblings he's using hyperbole – exaggeration – to make a point. Good parents have heard it when in frustration a child says, "I hate you! You're the meanest mom ever!" Maybe you said that when you were younger. How many of us with brothers or sisters have threatened fratricide? And yet, my brother and sister are both still alive, after more than one occasion when my fists may have reminded their tormentors to leave them be.

So, can we accept that? Can we accept that Jesus doesn't really want us to hold our family (or anyone else for that matter) in contempt? Remember, this is the same guy who scolded the Pharisees for making up rules that would override the commandment to honor your father and mother – "the first commandment with a promise" (Eph. 6:2) when they declared that what they should have used to honor their parents was instead being redirected as "an offering to God." (Mk. 7:11) He told us to love our neighbor as ourselves. In fact in Matthew 19:19, he puts the two together saying, "Honor your father and mother; also You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

So, if he doesn't mean that we should really hate these people, what does he mean? I think he gives us the answer. He asks a couple of questions. If you're beginning a building project, don't you calculate the costs and anticipate the challenges? (Lk 14:28) If a king is going to war, doesn't he consider whether he has the troops and whether they are up for the task? (Lk 14:31) Discipleship has a cost. It has risks. Jesus is preparing those who would be disciples to know what they – we – are getting ourselves into. He's saying, "People will turn against you. That may even include people you love." The blessing from the beatitude, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account," (Mt 5:11) isn't just about *those* people – but *your* people, as well.

It might not seem obvious to most of us who have grown up in a country – nominally at least – sympathetic of Christian practice. It might not seem obvious to those of us who grew up with parents who brought us – maybe dragged us – to Sunday School with our brothers and sisters. For others though, there is a real risk.

Several years ago when he was serving as our bishop, Bp. Hee-Soo Jung spoke about his conversion to Christianity. His father was a professor of Confucianism. His family were all Confucian. Becoming a Christian created a rift in those relationships. So, what should he have done? Should he have abandoned Jesus to keep those other relationships? You see where I'm going, right? That's what Jesus meant when he said that being his disciple means hating mother and father, wife and child, brother and sister... and even life itself. He's telling us that we may lose relationships that we value, and to take that into account.

His yoke may be easy and his burden light (Mt 11:30) but only when we're actually yoked to him bound to him and the glory of God's kingdom – rather than fretting about what used to be.

We want to hang on to what seems good, even at our own peril. When Aaron and the Israelites formed the golden calf in the wilderness, (Ex. 32) they were hedging their bets. Scripture even says they intended it as a means of returning to Egypt, because none of them had seen the Promised Land and the way there seemed too foreboding. People kept doing that. To keep his wives happy, Solomon allowed them to worship their foreign gods. When his son, Rehoboam ascended to the throne of Judah, the people built altars to other gods, they put up pillars and sacred poles to a fertility goddess, and they even allowed male temple prostitutes in the land. (1 Kgs. 14:22) Why? It wasn't just insolence. It was a way to get along with neighboring kings and merchants. But at what cost?

That's what Jeremiah was confronting in that passage earlier, not with Rehoboam – Jeremiah came much later – but with the tendency of God's chosen people to hedge their bets to worry about getting along with others – or winning favor with others – that they were willing to abandon not only God – but their identity. Remember they were the chosen people. When they rejected God, they rejected themselves.

But then comes the promise, the Lord God says, "I will remake you. In the way a potter remakes a jar. But that also means breaking down the misshapen jar that I have before me." It's almost as if God is pleading, "Let me do this for you. It may hurt a bit, but something better than you can imagine awaits."

He says the same thing to us. He tells us that if we want to be his disciples – if we want to experience the kingdom of heaven - not as some reward after we die, [{aside} Jesus only mentions paradise once and that's to the guy hanging on a cross next to him, (Lk 23:43) but he spoke about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (that is God's reign on earth) repeatedly.] if we want to be his disciples and to touch the kingdom – that we have to be willing to let go of anything that would pull us back – even if it seems good.

There's an old African monkey trap. A jar with a mouth large enough for a monkey to stick its hand in is baited with an irresistible treat. So the monkey reaches in to get the treat, but with its hand clenched, now the opening is too small. Unable/unwilling to release the treat, the monkey is restrained by the jar that has been tied to a tree. If monkeys only knew to let go, our zoos would be empty.

It's not always easy to tell what will ensnare us, so many things seem and are good; but if we take faith seriously, we need to pay attention to those things and those people who might detract us. It's not easy. Jesus was rejected by his hometown, even though they were the people who knew his character best. When Jesus told us that being a disciple meant taking up our cross, (Lk 14:27) he wasn't saying that we must live lives of misery and burden. He was inviting us to be willing to go where God calls us even when it seems daunting. He himself knew that his cross was a literal cross, but he also knew that it led to life and to our salvation. Even though the task was painful, he had to do it because that's who he was and is – the incarnation of God who made each of us in his image.

It may seem harsh when Jesus says that we have to be willing to let go of some otherwise loving relationships when they get in the way of our relationship with him; but how can we love those who love us and reject us if we don't love ourselves first. We owe it those whom we love to be the best us we can be, by claiming our identity as those who have been made in God's image and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. When we're serious, it's amazing how many of those who reject us will come around, even if they don't claim or believe in the promise for themselves. When we take faith seriously and live holy lives personally and in our service to and engagement with the world, God transforms us and the world around us. AMEN.