

Does It Add Up?

by

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Luke 14:25-33

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶“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. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Scripture passages like this are always a little thorny. Who really wants to hear a sermon about how hard it is to be a Christian? Why does the whole thing sound so demanding this morning? How does one hope to grow a church when the first line you offer is, “All are welcome to come and be miserable with us”? That’s not very smart marketing. It’s not enticing, or gentle, or particularly inviting. It’s also a little confusing.

Like the sign I once saw on a little Methodist Church that read, “Don’t let worries kill you, let the church help.” They meant well, of course, but how we talk about Christ and his claim on our life can be the difference between discipleship and disdain. And anyway, what is Jesus up to in this passage?

In my high school days I ran cross country and track. You probably can’t tell it now, but over the course of any given week I would run up to twenty miles or so. If you had told me as a fourteen-year-old at my first practice that I would be covering over 4,000 miles over the next four years on foot, I would have immediately made a b-line for the scrapbooking club sign-ups. We can hear the ridiculousness of the final calculation and think, “This seems a bit excessive. I’m not really sure this is for me.”

I presided over a wedding once. The bride was Presbyterian and the groom was Episcopalian, so I couldn’t say if the marriage would last or not. But I thought they were a wonderful couple, and they still are. If you had told those two love birds what awaited them, the joys and sorrows before them in the years ahead, I wonder if they wouldn’t have balked a little bit. Sometimes all we can do is put one foot in front of the other because taking the long view would overwhelm and paralyze us.

Now we aren’t certain of the audience to whom Jesus is speaking this morning. But we can glean based on the size of the crowd, and the fact that Luke says they are moving with him, that there is excitement in the air.

People are encouraged by what Jesus is doing. They want to be near him; and it seems, to go where he is going. He knows that not a one of them have a compass on their person. Jesus can sense that they don't know they are heading to Jerusalem, and what that implies. So he knows he has to tell them.

And how does he do that? He tells them about the burden of the cross. Interestingly enough in our pew Bible, the NRSV translation, Jesus says in v.27, "whoever does not carry *the* cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." But in the Greek, it's actually a possessive pronoun. "Whoever does not carry *his own* cross..." The cross we are being asked to carry is not the one Jesus carries, but another one. It's one that belongs to us. It's personal.

What does the cross mean? That's really a big question here. Several weeks ago one of my preaching mentors died. Mind you, he didn't know he was my mentor. Fred Buechner inspired generations of clergy who found ourselves with a lump in our throat when we encountered his sermons and writings. He defined the cross in a way that bears repeating:

Two of the noblest pillars of the ancient world—Roman law and Jewish piety—together supported the necessity of putting Jesus Christ to death in a manner that even for its day was peculiarly loathsome. Thus the cross stands for the tragic folly of human beings, not just at their worst but at their best.

Jesus needn't have died. Presumably he could have followed the advice of friends like Peter and avoided the showdown. Instead, he chose to die because he believed that he had to if the world was to be saved. Thus the cross stands for the best that human beings can do as well as for the worst...

Jesus died in the profoundest sense alone. Thus the cross stands for the inevitable dereliction and defeat of the best and the worst indiscriminately.

For those who believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead early on a Sunday morning, and for those also who believe that he provided food for worms just as the rest of us will, the conclusion is inescapable that he came out somehow the winner. What emerged from his death was a kind of way, of truth, of life, without which the last two thousand years of human history would have been even more tragic than they were.

A six-pointed star, a crescent moon, a lotus—the symbols of other religions suggest beauty and light. The symbol of Christianity is an instrument of death. It suggests, at the very least, hope.¹

Buechner points us to the high drama of Jesus' words here: We overhear him tell the crowd, "If you want to know what I am about, if you want to know what God is up to in the world, then you will need to carry some things out to Golgotha and let them die first."

The problem is that the Jesus we often like to talk about in church is the meek and mild one. He's the one with the charming phrases like "I am the vine and you are the branches." Or "come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest." He's the one who blesses little children and heals the sick and the lame. The kind of Jesus that we can set alongside the great teachers of the world's religions.

Yet, St. Paul told the church in Corinth though that while many hope to know of signs and wonders and wisdom, for him to preach the name of Christ is to preach Christ crucified. We just can't get away from

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Rev. and expanded [ed.]. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 20–21.

the cross. Nor should we, because if you ask me, it's the dying that makes the difference.

I wonder if one of the biggest challenges of Christianity is not the demands Jesus places on us, but the demands we place on ourselves. Our faith tells us that we need to rethink our priorities; of status, power, work, identity, relationships and meaning. In order to get to the heart of the matter, we will need to take some things to their deathbed and leave them there. Of course that comes with costs.

Jesus calculates the cost of being a disciple, or at least, he invites us to do so. Like a wisdom teacher from the Old Testament, he asks the crowd if they can do the math. He says to them, "do you know the price you'll need to pay to follow in this way?"

It makes sense when we remember that Calvin said Christianity "is a doctrine not of the tongue but of life." He said, "It is not apprehended by understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it processes the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart."² Following Christ jumbles our interior lives because to go where he goes and care about what he cares about means to let go of certain things, or to in some measure, reshuffle them.

But it's hard to hear Jesus talking like this. At least in Matthew's version Jesus says to the disciples, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me..." That's a little easier to take. But his language here in Luke is painful for our modern ears to hear. Anyone who talks of needing to hate your own mother or father in order to belong sounds more like a cult leader than the promised Son of David.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The library of Christian classics (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 20), 688.

It's worth remembering that Jesus uses it in the old Semitic way that means to turn away from, to detach oneself from. It's not the same as saying "I hate such and such." It's prophetic hyperbole. If Jesus really wanted us to hate our families, it would negate most of the verses about love in the scriptures.

No, Jesus is interested in causing us to reorder our personal precedence of loyalties. He's telling us that our first loyalty should actually redefine the others. Even our most sacred human relationships—the bonds between family—will be reordered when going about Jesus' way. That's not because he wants us to forsake our loved ones. It's because he wants us to understand that love in its proper context.

The 20th century apologist C.S. Lewis told a story in his allegorical work "The Great Divorce" about a woman named Pam who had lost her son. We don't know how Michael died, but we know he was still living at home when he did, leaving behind his parents and a sister. His mother worshipped the memory of him; enshrined his room just as left it. Refused to leave the house even though her husband and young daughter pleaded with her. She was ensnared by grief. Augustine said our hearts are restless until they rest in God. But this woman believed her heart was restless until she rested with her son.

When she has the chance to visit heaven, because she was residing in her own kind of hell, she is incensed that the angel giving her the tour tells her she needs to reorient herself before Michael will even be able to perceive she's there. She just wants to get on with it. She snarls at the angel when she says, "You wouldn't talk like that if you were a mother."

To which the angel replies, "You mean, if I were only a mother. But there is no such thing as being only a mother. You exist as Michael's mother only because you first exist as God's creature. That

relationship is older and closer. No, listen, Pam! God loves you. God also has suffered. God also has waited a long time.”³

I’ve always been haunted and quite honestly, troubled, by that interaction between a deeply wounded momma and this messenger of God. I know it’s a fable, but I wrestle with what it means to have something good, something deep and wonderful, like a mother’s love for her child, and to illustrate how even that kind of goodness can become corrupted, cut off from the source, leading to a kind of poison that harms others we love in the process.

I don’t know for sure, but I suspect Jesus is telling us the same thing. It is very easy to take something good, and turn it into an idol.

Whatever else he means, Jesus means at the very least that following in his way is often uphill, sometimes rough and narrow. It means giving up what we thought was of ultimate importance, in order to love deeper and longer and truer.

And if the story of the cross tells us anything, it tells us that what we give up to die isn’t really dead forever, but will come alive again, in the richness of that for which it was originally designed; by the resurrecting love of the Creator who thought all of us were worth it. Amen.

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce: A Dream* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 99.