

IS THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS JUST TOO HIGH?

Well, yikes. Really? “None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all of your possessions.” And this is just after he told us to hate our family members, and even life itself if we are to follow him. Again, I say “yikes.” This is just the kind of talk that keeps people from signing up to be a Christian. So, what do we do when we run into something like this in the Bible? Well, what we do *not* do is to accept ideas that do not fit into our overall understanding of who Jesus was and what he stands for. “Hate our families?” Based on everything you know about Jesus from biblical accounts, does it fit at all that he would call on us to hate anyone? Jesus loved families, blessed little children, told his disciples to take care of his mother at the end, and even invited us to call God our “Father.” Obviously, there is something else going on here, and we need to look a little deeper. The problem here really has to do with interpreting language which can sometimes be very misleading. What can confuse us is that Greek has many definitions of the words “love” and “hate,” unlike English in which limited we are limited to one. Actually, the word translated as “hate” comes from the Greek word “miso” which means to give up all choices except for one. So in reality what Jesus is talking about is setting priorities in our lives.

I majored in Economics as an undergraduate and was fascinated by the concept of “opportunity cost.” It is the idea that every time we make a decision, or decide on a choice, there is a cost in our giving up another possibility. In order for us to be fully aware of the value of what we are doing we must be mindful of what we are giving up by not choosing something else. What Jesus is telling us in this Gospel reading is that there is a cost in choosing to follow him, and we need to be aware of that cost. That is why he uses the examples of people deciding to build a tower without first calculating the cost, and the need for a king to know if he has enough soldiers available before he takes on another king’s army.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor who was imprisoned and eventually executed by the Nazis during World War II for his speaking and writing against Adolph Hitler’s regime. He was warned over and over again by his family and friends to tone down his rhetoric as so many of them did in order to survive. He was well aware of the danger yet his devotion to the Gospel of Love would not allow him to remain silent. He knew the possible cost of continuing to speak out, and he was willing to pay it, and he did so with his life. He knew very well that he had the

option of protecting himself, but he chose the costlier way because he was a disciple of Jesus Christ. He wrote a powerful book called “The Cost of Discipleship.”

So what are we to make of this Gospel account? I think many people think becoming a Christian is primarily an emotional experience. While emotion is certainly involved, Jesus wants us to take this decision seriously as it is the most important choice we make in our lives, who or what will we follow? He is telling us to think things through, to truly count the cost of following him because we will have to give up other possibilities if we do so, that “opportunity cost” I mentioned. If we decide the cost of living as his disciple is too high, we have the God-given freedom of choice to say, “Thanks, but no thanks. It is just too hard.”

We live busy lives. There are so many things that occupy our days, our thoughts, our activities. Does Jesus really expect us to think about him every day? Does he want us to put everything else down in

order to be aware of him every moment. Are we supposed to talk about him every day of our lives in order to be his disciple? The answer is “of course not” although I have to admit that I do hear his name mentioned quite regularly on the golf course.

Jesus was a realist, and all of his teaching is about living our lives each day as fully and joyfully as we possibly can. I think being a disciple of Jesus simply means that we are prepared to encounter each day as he would want us to. That doesn’t mean that we go around saying “Jesus is my Lord” all of the time, but rather that his teaching is the foundation for the decisions we make. Each of us has some authority, some basis, some reason for what we do. There is some source, some rationale we use to order our lives. What or who is that? Our answer to that question largely determines the direction of our lives, and the priorities we claim for ourselves. To use an extreme example, compare the decisions and actions of Mother Theresa and Adolph Hitler. Why were they so radically different in every way? It was because of the source of authority in their lives.

How about you and me during the week ahead? You are sitting around with some friends and one of them tells a joke that is clearly racist. What do you do? I have to confess that I remember a time when I was in that situation and I failed miserably. If I had said what I was thinking, and

what I believe, I would have said, “Bill, I really don’t think that is funny at all.” But to do so might have cost me a friend or two, or at the very least be seen as thinking that in some way I am better or holier than my friends. Back to that opportunity cost. Is it worth the potential cost to speak my mind knowing that there will be some kind of reaction, and probably a negative one. If the cost is too high I will sit there and smile and hope the conversation moves on. The cost of remaining silent is not feeling very proud of myself and I know that I have not behaved as a disciple of Jesus.

I have never forgotten a story I read in a book called “When a Nation Forgets” by Erwin W. Lutzer. He recalls living in Germany during the Nazi holocaust. He and his family were devout Lutherans, and certainly aware of what was happening to the Jews, but tried to stay out of it because of what could happen to them. A railroad happened to run behind their small church, and each Sunday morning they could hear the whistle in the distance and then the wheels roaring over the tracks as the train ran by. They were disturbed as they heard the cries coming from the train as it passed by. They knew very well that the train was filled with Jews heading for a death camp, and the screams tormented them. They knew when the train was coming and when they heard the whistle blow they began singing hymns. By the time the train went by the church they were singing at the top of their voices. If they could still hear the screams the sang even louder and soon heard them no more. Years had passed, and no one talked about it anymore, but the author could still hear that train whistle in his sleep. He prayed for God’s forgiveness for himself and all of the others that their faith was not strong enough to endure the cost of taking action against something they all knew was clearly wrong and against the teaching of Jesus.

Now, you and I are not likely to encounter such an extreme situation today, but are their times when we sing loud enough to drown out the pain and suffering and injustice being done all around us? Are there times when we figuratively cover our eyes and ears so as not to take too much notice of words and actions we know are not acceptable to disciples of Jesus? Do we just hope and pray that someone else will step up and do the right thing? Of course this is a very

personal question each of us must answer for ourselves. It can be a pretty uncomfortable feeling if we realize that we sometimes do hesitate to pay the cost of doing the right thing.

If we do decide to do the right thing, how in the world do we know what that is? I suppose it is an overused bumper sticker, but the answer remains WWJD, “what would Jesus do?” What he did *not* do was to ever be influenced by what other people might think of his words and actions. You and I struggle with that one, regardless of how much we may deny it.

Jesus is not telling us what to do as human beings, but challenging us with what to do as his disciples. The answer is clear, and simple not easy, but simple. We are to love God first, and then our neighbor as ourselves. That includes the people who are the butt of hateful jokes as well as those who tell the jokes. It includes those who hurt us as well as those who love us and encourage us. It includes those we agree with and like as well as those we simply cannot tolerate nor understand. Jesus is calling us, as his disciples, to take our decision-making seriously and to fully understand and accept what we do, and more importantly, *why* we do what we do. Guilt should never be the motivation, but rather a freely made decision to make Jesus the source and foundation of how we order our lives. What is the cost to us? Can we afford it?

The cost of speaking out usually does involve what others might think of us. So, when we consider that potential cost, do we sing a little louder? The whole issue is about the balance between risk and safety. Do we ask, “what is the right thing to do as a Christian in this situation,” or, “hmmm, what will it cost me if I speak up? Friends? Reputation? Security? Money?” Ultimately it all comes down to how important and influential our faith life is. Once again, that is a very personal question each of us faces just about every day of our lives. Do we speak up, or sing a little louder? Amen