

A SERMON BY RICHARD D. CLEWELL
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TITLE: “WHO WANTS TO BE A DISCIPLE?”
TEXT: Luke 14: 25-33 (Jer. 18: 1-11)

For those of us who call ourselves Christians, it may seem easy to follow in a centuries old tradition. Some of us may say, “My family has been Presbyterian for as long as can be remembered. I’m a third generation Fairmouter.” Others might state that they made a conscious decision to accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and to follow him. We all have come from diverse backgrounds and for varied reasons in our faith pilgrimages as those who are called as Christ’s people and disciples. Perhaps, like those first disciples, we travel with Christ looking for loving direction, an easier life, a fix for everything that seems wrong with us, to bring a new lilt to our voice, a little more sunshine in our existence. After all, Jesus in his day drew great crowds of people who followed him from place to place looking for miracles and healing. This is the picture in the fourteenth chapter of Luke, which leads to our Gospel text today. He heals a crippled woman, a man with severe tremors and relates parables; neat stories, with morals that run contrary to conventional wisdom.

Then he states something simply and clearly which I’m sure stopped them in their tracks even as it also “blindsides” us. (Read Luke 14:25-33) Jesus is on a roll in popularity and ruins it beyond any positive PR spin by bluntly declaring, “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.” I’m sure the crowd got real quiet. Did he say, “hate?” Isn’t he into love? One of his chosen ones, a theologian, attempts to put it in more understandable terms. “He doesn’t literally mean to hate your mom and dad. He means rather, keep them in proper perspective. Yet nobody can stop him. He goes on, “Another thing, if you won’t carry a cross, you can’t walk with me.” He gives two examples of faulty commitment: one of a builder who never estimates the cost of his structure and looks silly when he runs out of needed materials; the other of a king who goes to war without first considering whether or not he has the troops to win the war and thus looking stupid in trying to create peace. Count the cost. And if that wasn’t enough, he concludes his sermon with; “You can’t be my disciple if you don’t give up everything you own!” With demands like these, who wants to be a disciple?

In this text at least, Jesus clearly has no interest in meeting our needs. Instead, he seems intent on giving us needs we would not have had, had we not met him. He speaks of dumping some of our most cherished values – motherhood, family, possessions and self-fulfillment. When you think about some of the things Jesus said it’s a scary proposition to follow a way so out of step with our culture whose central values are attractiveness, achievement, and affluence. For many of us our sense of who we are depends on how well we measure up to these values as well as the other messages we have received about who we are and what we should be.

Yet, surprisingly, we’re sought out by God who loves us and wants us, calling us to walk in a way not of our own devising. I believe God in loving us understands our reluctance to risk hating qualified family relationships, to carry difficult and painful crosses, to follow Christ closely, to give up all our stuff, or to be counted on as reliable disciples. Perhaps God’s mercy will allow us to understand the master’s words calling us to give up all our plans and possessions to God and let this Jesus be Lord of every relationship and all that we have been graciously given.

The real question is what does it mean to love God? The Gospels certainly indicate Jesus' love for his mom during his ministry and until the very end when he declares John to be her adopted son at his death. He reached out regularly to parents with painful needs regarding their children. Yet, there is a tension throughout his life and ministry as when he disappeared at age 12 in sheer disregard for his parents in order to "be about his Father's business" and in often describing human limitations in terms of faith and commitment (i.e. If you had faith the size of a grain of mustard, you could remove mountains). We must live with this tension, even as he did when he cried, "Let his cup pass from me" and then, "not my will, but your will be done." Jesus in his humanity understands your and my struggle. This text impacts us to recognize that divine grace accepts us always where we are and also provides transforming power and a path to love God more fully.

Dorothy Soelle in her recent book, *The Silent Cry*, comments that "we Christians have generally been pretty good at proclaiming God's love for us, but less clear in emphasizing the importance of our love for God." What do both Old Testament and Christ's words mean "to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your life force and with all your mind, and with all your strength?" (Deut 6:5, Luke 10:27) This great commandment indicates practice – paying attention to God and to what God loves. Practice is about the living of the Christian way.

Marcus Borg in his book, *The Heart of Christianity – Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, declares, "By practice, I mean all the things that Christians do together and individually as a way of paying attention to God. They include being a part of a Christian community, a church, and taking part in its life together as community. They include worship, Christian formation, collective deeds of hospitality and compassion, and being nourished by the Christian community. They include devotional disciplines, especially prayer and spending time with the Bible. And they include loving what God loves through the practice of compassion and justice in the world."

Those first chosen followers came to know the real meaning of the word disciple – not so much meaning "a student of a teacher," but rather "a follower after somebody." It meant for them a following after Jesus, a journeying with Jesus. If we look at the Gospel stories what do we learn about the relationship between Jesus and his disciples as well as us as disciples? Discipleship means being on the road with Jesus in a faith journey. It means to be an itinerant, a sojourner, to have nowhere to lay one's head, no permanent resting place. It means undertaking the journey from the life of conventional worldly wisdom to an alternative spiritual wisdom. It means listening to his teaching – sometimes understanding it, sometimes not quite getting it. It can involve denying him, even betraying him. It's being in his presence and company. It means eating at his table and experiencing his banquet, which includes not just me and not just us, but those we tend to exclude. It means being nourished and fed by him – "take, eat, lest the journey be too great for you." Journeying with Jesus also means to be in an alternative community of Jesus, not an individual path but an accompanied pilgrimage, where the community remembers and celebrates Jesus. This community, the church, in John Shea's words, is to "Gather the folks, tell the stories, break the bread." Discipleship involves becoming compassionate, the defining mark of the follower of the Christ – a fruit of the Spirit and to the ethos of the community of Jesus. It is a journey of transformation from being under the lordship of culture to the life of companionship with God. (Like Jeremiah's potter and the clay) Its emphasis is not primarily on the Christian life as believing or being good but as a relationship with God that transforms us into more compassionate beings, "being changed into the likeness of Christ." (2 Cor. 3:18)

Scott McKnight, professor at North Park University, in his recent book, *Loving God, Loving Others*, writes, "What is it that turns discipleship into a commitment that keeps us faithful? What turns faith practices into a path of spiritual formation . . . Behind discipleship and beyond faith practice is love – love for God and love for others. Radical commitment is fine if it is fired by love. Spiritual formation is noble if it produces love for God and others."

John Ortberg, pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, states clearly, "The true indicator of spiritual well-being is growth in the ability to love God and people."

What is indicated in this passage and like portions of Scripture is the movement from secondhand religion to firsthand dynamic faith; from having heard about Jesus with the hearing of the ear to being in relationship with the Spirit of Christ and walking with the living Jesus who goes with us now. Dean William R. Inge states, "Religion is a way of walking, not a way of talking." Parker Palmer quotes a slogan from *Outward Bound* regarding discipleship, "If you can't get out of it, get into it." This is a good motto for tough and challenging times of life. Rather than try to escape the demands of discipleship, we ought to get into them, take them as a call to a more adventurous life. In showing and growing our love for God, who knows what may happen in our lives and our transforming journey of faith? Do you want to be a disciple?

Amen

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