

Everything Passes Through Christ
A Sermon on Luke 14:25-33
Proper 18
September 8, 2019

Introduction

It sounds like mixed signals. We should hate our father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, even our own self? How do we square that with the love commandment?

Before becoming a disciple, we should sit down and calculate the cost? We should let it go if we reckon that it is going to cost too much? How does that square with the call of the disciples, who dropped everything and followed Jesus when he simply said, “Follow me”?

Can these sayings be reconciled with each other?

First Move: Calculating the Cost of Discipleship

We can note some distinctions, but there is a larger point: Everything passes through Christ.

First distinction: Jesus is speaking to the crowds not his disciples. He chose his disciples. Presumably he knew they were up to it. Peter and his brother Andrew did leave their nets and their fishing boats. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, did leave their father and their nets and their fishing boats. These nets and boats were their livelihood.

The crowds are curious about Jesus but they haven’t committed to becoming disciples. They are kicking the tires before they decide whether to commit.

Second distinction: When Jesus talks about hating your father and your mother and the rest of your family, he could be using hyperbole. Like when he says cut your hand off if it causes you to sin. Or it is easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a camel than to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hyperbole is a figure of speech that uses extreme exaggeration to make a sharper distinction.

The Greek word for hate, μίσσω, could also be translated as disregard or disfavor. It does not need to carry the emotional intensity of hating someone. It could mean, Put God first. Don’t favor or prefer your family, prefer God. Where is your first allegiance?

You even have to hate your self. That doesn't mean self loathing. You have to prefer God to your very self. He unpacks that a little more by saying, "Whoever does not carry one's own cross and come behind me is not able to be my disciple." Crucifixions were common in Jesus' day. Jesus surely had seen several. The vertical beam of the cross was permanently planted at the execution site. The condemned man carried the horizontal beam from the jail to the execution site. It was like digging your own grave. Jesus did not have to have his own crucifixion in mind. It is a metaphorical way of saying you have to die to your self, your own interests, your own will and open yourself up to God's will.

The NRSV says you "cannot be my disciple" if you don't hate family and self. A more literal translation is you "are not able to be my disciple." Jesus is not rejecting the person who wants to be a disciple. He is pointing out that the person does not have the right stuff. They don't have what it takes to be a disciple.

Jesus tells two parables to emphasize the cost of the commitment. One is from farm life, the other is from the royal court.

If a farmer wishes to build a watch tower, "does he not first sit down and reckon the cost, whether he has [enough] to completion?" The Greek word for reckon is derived from the word for pebble. To reckon is to count pebbles.

The social cost of failing to count pebbles is humiliation. All those who observe that the man could not finish the tower will begin to mock him.

The second parable is about a king who is preparing to meet another king on the battlefield. Will he not first sit down and consider how many soldiers are in his army and the opposing king's army? If he is outnumbered two to one, will he not send emissaries to sue for peace instead of being slaughtered?

The men in both parables are fools. They lack wisdom. Wisdom is not about being book smart. Wisdom comes from God. It is spiritual maturity in how we live.

Today's text concludes with another saying. You are not able to be my disciple unless you take leave of your possessions. The NRSV says hate, but it is a different word from before. You need to walk away from your possessions, just as Peter and Andrew and James and John did. Possessions is a translation of a Greek participle that means, what is near you, what belongs to you. It could mean the things you own. It also could be metaphorical: your ideas, your ideology. That might be a better translation today: you are not able to be my disciple if you are weighed down by a political ideology.

Second Move: Bonhoeffer on *Discipleship and the Individual*

Several commentators called today's text, *The Cost of Discipleship*. That is the title of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's best-known book. Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who was executed in a Nazi prison camp just before Germany surrendered in World War II.

Bonhoeffer devotes a chapter to today's verse about hating your family. He calls the chapter, *Discipleship and the Individual*. He uses the image of Christ as the Mediator. He is not only the mediator between man and God but between man and man and man and reality.

I love that image. I preached in February about Jesus as the Great High Priest. It is an image that comes from the Letter to the Hebrews. Priests were responsible for maintaining the boundaries between God and people. They studied the Torah to learn the boundaries, and they taught them to the people. Priests were mediators between God and the people. Priests had to be clean and holy to approach the altar in the Temple, bearing sacrifices on behalf of the people that bring to Yahweh. The gifts would purify the people of sin and uncleanness. The priests connected people with God. Jesus as the great high priest is our mediator. He passes through the heavens to approach God on our behalf. Bonhoeffer explores the image more fully than I did.

Bonhoeffer says that Jesus has reconciled us to God. That is fundamental to Disciples' understanding of mission. We cannot do the ministry of reconciliation until the reconciling work of God has gotten inside us. Jesus makes us one with God and one with each other.

Bonhoeffer asks, after Christ has reconciled us with God, how can we return to the world and enjoy a direct relationship with it? The world crucified Christ. The world will still crucify us if we have the love of God in our hearts. To be reconciled with God and have an unchanged relationship with the world is to equate the love of God with love of the world. The justification of the sinner becomes justification of sin.

For the Christian the only God-given realities are those that he or she receives from Christ. What is not given by the incarnate Son is not given by God.

We are separated from one another by an unbridgeable gulf of otherness and strangeness. If we have not made room for Christ, we cannot get our Self out of the way. We love the other because of how they make us feel instead of loving the other for their own sake. There can be no genuine thanksgiving for the blessings that we have received from nation, family, history and nature without the heartfelt penitence that gives glory to Christ alone above all else.

Bonhoeffer uses Abraham as an example. Abraham leaves his friends and his father's land. He becomes a stranger and a sojourner. He trusts God, even if it means leaving home and family. Later he is called by God to give his son Isaac as a sacrifice. The direct relationship between Abraham and the child of promise is broken. Abraham must learn that the promise does not depend upon Isaac but on God alone. When God sees that Abraham is willing to give God priority over his son, Abraham receives Isaac back but now sees him as a gift of God.

In the same way, the direct way to the neighbor is barred. We cannot enter into authentic relationship with out neighbor except through the Mediator. Everything has to pass through Christ.

The apostle Paul says much the same thing when he says that he sees the world through the eyes of a crucified Christ. Christ is the lens through which we look at reality.

This is the new life that we are promised at our baptism. We die to our old self and rise to new life in Christ.

Third Move: Christ as the Mediator of All Our Relationships

This is a vision of Christ at the center of our lives. This is a very Disciples like understanding of Christ. Early Disciples liked to say we have no creed but Christ. We don't believe in creedal statements about Christ, we believe in the dynamic person of Christ.

Sometimes we get in interfaith discussions and we water down our view of Christ. We don't want to offend a Jew or a Hindu. Yes, we shouldn't force Christ on them, but we shouldn't be afraid to bring our own convictions to the table. That enriches interfaith dialogue, when we share with each other how God has reached out to each of us.

Christ is our way to God. Bonhoeffer is a follower of Karl Barth, another great German theologian. Barth emphasizes the mystery of God. All we know about God is what God reveals to us. God's greatest revelation is Christ. Christians believe that Jesus is the incarnation of God--he is what God would look like if God were walking amongst us. Our views of God are shaped by how Jesus understood God.

We cannot help but read the Bible as Christians. The New Testament reflects the gospel writers' understanding of how God was revealed in Jesus. We cannot read the Old Testament as Jews read it. We try to be faithful to their perspective, but if we are honest, we acknowledge that we cannot help but read the Old Testament through a Christian lens.

Our spiritual practices are modeled on the spiritual practices of Jesus. We practice humility in part because of the Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11: Jesus, though he was in the form of God, emptied himself and was obedient until death, even death on a cross. We go into a closet to pray to God in secret so that we will not be like the hypocrites who pray in the synagogues and on street corners so that they will be seen by men. When we pray, we empty ourselves of our thoughts and desires so that nothing will come between us and God.

When we go into the mission field to do God's mission, we find Jesus in the least of these. God's mission is the kingdom of God, and our understanding of the kingdom of God comes from Jesus' description of the kingdom of God in his parables.

Even our relationship with our family members passes through Christ if we are to have healthy relationships. We can't succumb to the fantasy of our culture that we won't have any problems if we find the right partner. We will still have the same problems; we are marrying a partner not a savior. We can't put unrealistic expectations on our partner. We have to see them through the eyes of Christ, as a beautiful child of God with gifts and flaws. We enter into covenant relationship with them, modeled on our covenant relationship with God through Christ.

The trend today is to have dream weddings in outdoor chapels that are in all-in-one facilities that cater the rehearsal dinner and the wedding reception. The price tag can run from \$20,000 to \$40,000. They seem to me to be vanity projects more than weddings.

Our relationships with our children should pass through Christ. Look at your children as a gift, but not as the primary meaning of life. The trend today is toward helicopter parents who do too much for their children and try too hard to protect them. When their children are adults, they still do too much for them—they enable them. Jonathan Haidt's most recent book is called *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Haidt is a college professor. From his experience he sees that college students today can be fragile; many students want to be sheltered from speech that they disagree with. They say it makes them feel unsafe. There is no expectation that they will grow stronger from encounters with speech that challenges them. Haidt advocates raising free-range kids—give them as much responsibility as they can bear at their age.

Ministers may seem to be uniquely unqualified to address the issue of proper family relationships. The divorce rate is higher among ministers than among the general population. [I have been divorced twice, though the divorces were when I was young, away from the church.] Ministers' spouses often say that the minister marries

the church. Preachers' kids tend to drift away from the church. Gandhi and King, two of the great spiritual leaders of the last century, were not known as good family men.

Conclusion

We all struggle with the proper balance in our relationships. We struggle to find our True Self. Our excessively individualistic culture builds a False Self. Our identity is based on social conformity and social expectations. Thomas Merton urges us to Pray for Our Own Discovery. Salvation is finding our true inner self. We must draw it up from deep within ourselves, like a jewel from the bottom of the sea. Instead of being guided by passions and selfish appetites, we are filled with love and mercy. "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Gal 2:20 [NRSV].

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