

“What Is the Most Shocking Thing Jesus Said?”

Luke 14:25-33

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If the words in today’s text don’t disturb you, I’m not sure you have read them carefully or taken them seriously. I am confident they turned a lot of heads when Jesus spoke them, and later when Luke recorded them.

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

This could be the most astonishing thing Jesus ever said. Who among us does not struggle with it?

It appears to contradict the fifth commandment which was given to the Israelites as they set out on their journey of faith to freedom from Egypt. “Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land your God is giving you.” It undermines Jesus’ ethic of love by which he lived his life and conducted his public ministry, and it tramples all over our culture’s insistence upon family values.

What did Jesus mean by these words and the two examples which followed? Why did Luke include them in his writings? How do they speak to us today?

For me, they underscore the need to take seriously Jesus’ invitation to follow him. Jesus knew following in his footsteps would not be easy. For the most part, it would be a struggle and demand the highest level of commitment. Jesus wanted to make this perfectly clear, which he did with the use of hyperbole, a deliberate exaggeration intended to make a point, not to be taken literally.

I do not believe Jesus was giving his audience permission to be ugly to their parents or even abandon their family in a time of need. Instead, he was emphasizing the demands of discipleship.

Their relationship to God should take precedence over the dearest and most sacred relationships on earth. As strong as the family bond was, and it was strong in that culture as it is ours, the bond between Jesus and his disciples needed to be stronger.

In Aramaic, the word “hate” did not always express disdain for another person. It was also used to distinguish which relationships were most important. For Jesus, no relationship was more important than the one he had with God, the source of life and giver of every good gift.

The parallel text in Matthew 10:37-38 makes this point another way. I think you will find it more appealing and understandable.

“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me.”

Why does discipleship require such a high level of devotion and loyalty? Why must we count the cost before making the decision to follow Jesus, much like a good builder would do before beginning construction or a wise general preparing for battle?

The invitation to follow Jesus is a call to live by the same ethical and moral standards he modeled. In our relationships with others, we are to be honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, fair, compassionate, forgiving, humble and unselfish. At all times and in all places, we must live by the Golden Rule, treating all people with dignity and respect.

The decision to follow Jesus means we will live by a set of values quite different from the world's. As his followers, we'll value love over hate, serving over being served, sacrifice over self-indulgence, truth over deception, justice over injustice, generosity over greed, humility over arrogance, forgiveness over revenge, healing over hurting and peace over war.

The call to be his disciple is a call to be good neighbors, building bridges of understanding, goodwill and reconciliation instead of walls of suspicion and hate. We will open our hearts to those in need and be ready on a moment's notice to lend a helping hand to anyone who is struggling. As his disciples, we will speak for those whose voice is never heard and demand their concerns be considered like everyone else's.

Embracing Jesus' values and lifestyle will inevitably put us at odds with family members, friends and the prevailing philosophies and patterns of our culture. At times, we'll feel as if we are swimming upstream. Only the highest level of commitment to God through Christ will keep us focused and determined to remain faithful.

I know we have a tendency to focus our attention upon the reconciling work and good news of the gospel. Forgiveness and hope for a better life certainly appeal to all of us. We need the grace and mercy God offers through faith in Jesus, and we are eternally grateful for them.

On the other hand, Jesus calls us to embrace the responsibilities which accompany the gift of salvation. We need to have the same kind of impact upon our world Jesus had on his, and quite frankly, the world needs this from us, too. Only the highest level of commitment to God will make this happen, though.

You know what impressed me the most about Diana Nyad's historic swim from Cuba to Miami last week? It was not her age, 64, or her ability to stay in the water for fifty-three hours. What impressed me the most was the fact she has pursued this dream for over thirty-five years.

Her first attempt to swim from Cuba to Miami without a shark cage was in 1978, and this was followed by four more unsuccessful trips. Throughout all the ups and downs, however, she never gave up or wavered in her commitment to accomplish this goal. In spite of the many challenges she faced, she never quit dreaming, planning, preparing and trying, and her relentless determination paid off.

If we are going to impact our world as Jesus did, we must have the same level of commitment to our mission as Diana Nyad did to making that historic swim. If we don't, we'll grow weary in our efforts to make our world better and be tempted to drift away from Jesus. Distractions will turn our heads and take our eyes off of what is most important. Stiff resistance will intimidate us and strike fear in our hearts. The cross will become heavy, and the call to discipleship will be replaced by the call of the world to pursue possessions, pleasures and comfort. We'll follow that worldly call if we do not love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

I sometimes wonder if we have done a disservice to people by focusing so much attention upon the redeeming love of God and not enough upon our response to follow Jesus in the work of transforming the world. Have we tried to market the gospel in such a way that all people hear is what God can do for them, not what they must offer in return? Has the church tried to attract big crowds by entertaining people or guaranteeing prosperity? Have we reduced the Christian faith to another layer of security in a frightening world instead of a call which thrusts us into dangerous and risky situations?

The most intriguing part of this passage for me is found at the beginning. "***Now large crowds were traveling with him***, and he turned and said, 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.' "

There is not a seasoned politician or political consultant who would advise Jesus to say those words. This is not the way to make a big crowd bigger. It is the way to do just the opposite, to lose momentum and a crowd.

In all likelihood, this is exactly what happened. Many people in that crowd were following Jesus because he was a celebrity, and they wanted to be a part of something new and exciting. Jesus knew they were far more attached to their family, friends, possessions and the comforts of life than they were him. He also knew when following him would get difficult and dangerous, they would walk away.

This was why Jesus told that large crowd of people to take this decision seriously and count the cost. They would receive much by following him, but much would also be expected. God needed them to use their gifts, influence, voice and resources to make the world better for all people, and Jesus could show them how that could be done.

This is good advice for us, too.

German pastor and theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote in his book, The Cost of Discipleship, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." This is precisely what happened to Bonhoeffer eight years after he penned these words. He was hanged in a concentration camp in 1945 for speaking out against Hitler and the Nazis.

This morning, none of us is being asked to die for Jesus, but to live for him. What Jesus needs from us is to live each day by the highest moral standards, be a good neighbor, use our influence to confront injustice, lift up the fallen and share our abundant resources with those who are struggling.

Are you doing this? Do you love God more than anyone or anything and live for Him as best you can? You will not regret it if you are. Following Jesus and allowing him to use you to transform the world is the most rewarding and satisfying life you can live. It is not the easiest, but it is the best.

Has your commitment to God slipped recently? What are you not doing you once did to grow spiritually and serve in Jesus' name? What or who do you love now more than God? What are you holding on to that prevents you from responding to God's call upon your life?

Do you realize once you have made the decision to follow Christ, there is no counting the cost beyond that point? Whatever God asks for, you give. Wherever God leads, you go. You trust God with all your heart and make available to Him everything you have and are to be used in His service.

Is this the level of commitment you have this morning, or do you need to recommit your life to God? I know someone who will help you if you do. He helped Jesus to remain faithful and will do the same for you.