

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 9:57-10:24 *"The Cost of Discipleship"*

Is there a cost to being a disciple of Jesus? Or is it completely free, all a matter of grace? It's been a contentious issue since the 1st C. At some points the church has seemed to say "work hard and you will deserve grace;" at other times, "you can do nothing to deserve grace, but it will cost you plenty." In the mid-20th century, German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer defined the issue starkly: *"Cheap grace means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a principle... the love of God as a Christian conception of God... Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance... grace without discipleship, grace without the cross... But grace is costly, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ... it costs a man his life, but it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. It is costly because it cost God the life of his Son... it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life."*

Bonhoeffer knew whereof he spoke: he was a leader in the Confessing Church in the 1930s, opposed the Nazis, assisted plots against Hitler, was finally arrested, imprisoned, and then executed by the S.S. at Hitler's direct order in April 1945, just weeks before the camp he was held in was liberated by American troops. He was 39 years old, and he was sure there is a cost to discipleship.

1) *Jesus' Disciples*

In Luke 9, Jesus has set out *"resolutely for Jerusalem."* He knows where he is going, and why, but he is not in a hurry. He will take time to preach the Gospel in Samaritan villages, he will spend perhaps weeks with his friends Martha, Mary and Lazarus; and above all he will train his disciples to grasp the link between suffering and glory. The group that travels from Galilee is evidently larger than we sometimes imagine - not just the Twelve and a group of women who support them, but enough men for Jesus to send out an "advance party" of 72 *"ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go"* in Samaria.

His goal for his disciples is that they should become as resolute as he is; they must learn what it means to *"follow him"* when he knows he is going to the Cross. So this passage begins with three examples of "discipleship" that will not suffice. One would-be follower discovers that he must face being cut off from the security of home. Two others learn that saying to Jesus *"I will follow, but first let me..."* is no better than saying "no thank you." They learn that even family obligations must take second place in the life of disciples. They learn that to be *"looking back after putting your hand to the plow"* can mean being disqualified. These are hard lessons,

and it's clear that Jesus is now looking for quality and not quantity among his disciples!

The "72" who are sent out - symbolical, many scholars think, of the "number of nations in the world" listed in Genesis 10, and therefore prefiguring the church's "mission to the Gentiles" - the 72 are also warned of the cost of their mission. They will be echoing the mission of John the Baptist in "preparing the way for the Lord," and by now everyone knows what happened to John at the hands of Herod Antipas. They will have to go with too few people for the size of the task, entirely dependent on the providence of God and the kindness of strangers, ready for rejection, yet carrying with them a gospel of peace, and proclaiming that the new community called "the kingdom of God" has arrived in Jesus.

When they return "successfully" from their mission, they are warned not to be proud of their achievements "in Jesus' name," but to rejoice in the grace of God that admits them to Jesus' kingdom and has "written their names (in the book of life) in heaven." They learn that the real opposition to their mission is not from Samaritan villagers, but from supernatural evil that opposes what Jesus is resolutely planning to do. In other words, their discipleship is anything but a free ride. The authority and power of God goes with them in the commission of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and they will not be harmed in any ultimate way. But they can expect to endure hardship, to suffer, to be rejected, to find themselves dependent on God alone.

As they learn these things by their experience of discipleship, Jesus rejoices that *the coming of God's kingdom* has been revealed to "children" like this. Because all the hardship they face, all the rejection, is in fact rejection of Jesus, which in turn means rejection of God the Father who sent him,

which in turn means becoming aligned with Satan, which in turn means the rejectors will themselves "*fall like lightning*" as Jesus knows Satan will one day. The outcome is not in doubt; and Jesus' disciples will share in Jesus' glory just as they now share in his suffering.

2) *We Who Follow*

So who is a true follower of Jesus? Are you? Am I? What does it mean to be his disciple?

First we can see that it's far more than "volunteering" to follow him. Only obeying Jesus' command "*Follow me*" is enough even to get us started. That deep conviction of being *called*, of having no choice but to respond, is fundamental to discipleship. We have almost lost that sense of "calling" - one of the great insights of the Reformation was that the call to discipleship is not restricted to a small group of "holy" people - priests, monks, sisters - but that everyone who hears Jesus' words is "called." We are in danger of slipping back to the early 16th C., thinking that a few people like the Pastor, or Craig Malbon who's in seminary, or Bruce Miller who's a licensed lay preacher, are "*called*," while everyone else is just a "*volunteer*," with all the differences that those words imply.

To hear Jesus call us, to discover that he has chosen to "*reveal the Father*" to us, to obey his call, is the first essential step to discipleship. But it leads inevitably to other immediate calls that require us to obey. We have to re-prioritize. Our *security of "home"* may disappear, and we may find we never have "a place to lay our heads" again. We may find that following Jesus takes *priority over family*, which is as outrageous an idea to us in suburban America today as it was to Jews of the 1st C. We may find that *we cannot be forever "looking back"* now that we have "put our hands to the plow," because to look back is to risk being like Lot's wife leaving Sodom.

At the least, it means learning that you will never plow a straight furrow if you look at the plow, or look backwards; you must look straight ahead.

Are any of us ready for this kind of costly discipleship? Or are we "too busy"? Are there not enough hours in the week to be disciples of Jesus as well as parents, professionals, homeowners, athletes, retirees? Have we bought into the ideal of "family first"? Are we still too attached to things in Sodom or Egypt and keep looking over our shoulders? You know, as well as I do, that the call to discipleship sounds altogether too much when put in these terms! We like "God is love" and "amazing grace," but the "cost of discipleship" sounds too high. Rather leave it to a few professionals! Do we wonder then why the church is so weak as a cultural force? If Christianity is merely whipped cream on top of our suburban sundae, what lasting value can it have, and how will it survive among younger generations that don't care for our sundaes?

If following Jesus means heading for the cross, and suffering rejection along the way, who wants it? Our trouble, it seems, is that we have had it too easy too long, living in the twilight of "Christendom" in a land where Christianity is still socially acceptable and even desirable. What if we found ourselves in a culture that despised Christian faith? Reading my morning devotionals (from Scripture Union) this week, I winced at the words of a British bishop about the way the church in the UK is either condemned for not doing enough to help the needy, or when Christians do help, they are derided as "do-gooders." How would our discipleship fare if we lived in a culture that really opposed faith?

Jesus assumed that his followers would suffer, as he had suffered. He seems never to

have pictured a situation where his followers would live sedately in "a Christian nation" where Christianity was indistinguishable from "respectable citizenship." He seems to have thought, and taught, that true disciples would suffer rejection, have to put their families second, perhaps leave their homes and careers, in order to follow him. But in all that, he also assumed they would learn that his protection from evil, his gospel of peace, the presence of his Holy Spirit, and his rejoicing in the background over his people, would be among the rewards of true discipleship!

So maybe we need to apply this test to our discipleship: not simply "are we suffering?" but "are we sensing the joy of the Lord in our lives, do we carry the aroma of peace with us and find welcome and hospitality as we go, are we grateful for God's grace and that "our names are written in heaven," do we know that suffering and glory are always and necessarily linked in the kingdom of God?

"Blessed are the eyes that see what you see," said Jesus, "and the ears that hear what you hear... there are many who have wanted to, and do want to, see and hear what you see and hear, but cannot." I can tell you that is true. I know people who long to believe, and to experience the grace of God and the peace of God and the deliverance that Jesus can bring. Blessed indeed are those who have been privileged to hear his call, to become disciples of Jesus, even if following him costs them far more than they ever imagined.

Let us pray...