

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a feeling that no matter what is said today from this pulpit, no matter how comforting the Good News of Jesus Christ will be for any of us today, the only thing that anyone is going to hear and remember about this Gospel text today is Jesus saying:

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.²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26b)

This might be the only time we hear those who take Holy Scripture literally say, well, that's not what Jesus is really saying. But actually, if we say this, we are proving the point that Jesus is making with this statement. Nonetheless, this passage cries out for a clearer understanding of the use of language. But no matter how we parse this out, in the end there will remain a hard kernel of truth within this difficult statement from Jesus. Looking past the affronting difficulty of this language, there lies a simple but challenging question. This statement is not about hating our loved ones, rather Jesus puts before us a question...are you a disciple or not...are you in, or are you out...are you in fully and whole heartedly?

Let me give an example of the point I am attempting to make. My oldest brother who played music with me professionally for years was on a no smoking kick at one point in our career. It was at a time when we were working a great deal and our voices were getting worked even harder than usual. I guess he thought that quitting cigarettes would help his voice. So, he started to *tell folks* he quit smoking...which actually was sort of ridiculous because the bars and clubs we were working in were so smoky that one may as well smoke because of all the secondhand smoke. But by the end of the night when the clubs and bars were closed, all the people gone from the place, and we were tearing down and packing up our equipment, he would be asking for a cigarette for another bandmate. I'd ask him, "Doug, I heard you say you quit smoking?" He'd say to me. "I did." I'd say to him, "but you're smoking now, either you quit or you didn't."

Jesus is saying the very same thing to us today, either you're a disciple or you're not a disciple. You can't just SAY you're a disciple. It's like saying, "I'm not really pregnant," well either you are or you are not. This comment from Jesus is not about "hating" our father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, Jesus is asking us, are you a disciple or not? Are you going to follow me, or are you going to follow what you are comfortable with...are you going to follow what you are familiar with...are you going to simply SAY I'm a disciple?

Starting back in chapter 9 of this Gospel, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross and since then, in this Gospel, it has been tracking his journey to the cross, his progress to his death for us...I don't think Jesus wants to hear, "I'll follow you until it gets difficult or starts to threaten my life, then I will deny even knowing you." Either you're a disciple or you're not.

Nonetheless, for me, hate was always a strong word...it is a word that I never cared for. I have said and used very foul language in my lifetime and sadly, I continue to short-change my use of the English language. But there was something about this word "hate" that I hate...pun intended.

When we hear or read the word “hate” in this context we assume our definition to feel intense or passionate dislike for someone or something. We assume Jesus is telling us to have a strong aversion to our father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself. We assume Jesus is telling us to treat our loved ones and even life itself with hostility and treat them and life as if they were an enemy or an opponent. Is this what Jesus is really telling us?

In our assumed understanding of this English translated term hate, we define it as we know it, as if the glass were half empty. The Greek term used here in this passage is *μισώ* that sees our glass NOT half empty, but half full. The term *μισώ* is used to convey a lesser form of love. In other words, *μισώ* does not mean the despising of someone but rather preferring someone else. We all seem to like ice cream, but there are some flavors we love more than others, but it is all ice cream that we love.

So, for example, God was once described as loving Jacob but hating Esau...but both served under the divine guidance of God. Likewise, the patriarch Jacob loved Rachel but “hated” his other wife, Leah (Genesis 29:31). In the context it is pretty clear that this means simply that Jacob loved Rachel more than he loved Leah. Jesus is not calling us to hate our loved ones with some wild-eyed loathing fury, rather, Jesus is calling us to choose him—to follow him more.¹ I think Matthew’s Gospel conveyed the nuance of this term “hate” better by saying it this way:

³⁷ 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; (Matthew 10:37).

Later in this Gospel we hear Jesus explain this again in a different context:

¹³ No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.’ (Luke 16:13)

What we are hearing today in this statement from Jesus is that the cost of discipleship is great...so great that it is either or...either you are a disciple following only Jesus or not. It is a call as Jesus puts it, to take up our cross...or to carry our own cross and follow him. The cost of discipleship calls for us to carry our own cross...meaning, constantly putting aside ourselves in favor of seeing all of life through the lens of service to God...not just by paying it lip service when it suits us, but constantly following, regardless.

The cost of discipleship in the face of our culture today may not sit well with us because it flies right into the face of the attitude and tension of our narcissistic and self-serving culture...so Jesus is asking, are you in or are you out. While there are times here of late, that we may want to roll up the sidewalks and shelter ourselves from the world and live in solidarity to ourselves. Ironically, this call to discipleship is a call to individuality, but it is not to a call to an isolated individuality. It is a call to act individually in service to God, to stand in the face of all that rejects this service. This is a call to reject the ways of the culture and those who would attempt to dissuade God’s call to serve others or to put others needs ahead of our own.

¹ The point made about the term “hate” I borrowed from Scott Hoezee in his commentary on Luke 14:25-33, in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Third Readings* Roger E. Van Ham, Editor, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001, page 404, and Pastor Gregory P. Fryer, Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY 9/8/2019, in preparation for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 18C.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer wrote extensively on the cost of discipleship and addresses discipleship and the individual this way:

Jesus' call to discipleship makes the disciple into a single individual. Whether disciples want it or not, they have to make a decision; each has to decide alone. It is not their own choice to desire to be single individuals. Instead, Christ makes everyone he calls into an individual. Each is called alone. Each must follow alone. Out of fear of such aloneness, a human being seeks safety in the people and the things around them. Individuals suddenly discover all their responsibilities and cling to them. Under their cover, they want to make their decision, but they do not want to stand up alone in front of Jesus, to have to decide with only Jesus in view. But at that moment neither father nor mother, neither spouse nor child, neither nation nor history cover a person being called. Christ intends to make the human being lonely. As individuals they should see nothing except him who called them.²

In other words, the call to discipleship calls one to stand alone before God and with Jesus and not be influenced by those around us or to retreat into the patronizing comfort of others when we are challenged. Our instincts may want to sit in the comfort of those around us, to seek opinions about faith and the meaning of discipleship, but when we look to the cross, we don't see a cluster of folks, we don't see disciples, we see Jesus alone. We hear this play out when Jesus tells the disciples of his impending death.

³¹ Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' (Mark 8:31-33)

Also, when Jesus is struggling in the garden, he is away from the sleeping disciples while he struggles and prays...alone before God. When we are challenged to the core of our very faith, we confront it alone and we do so without the opinions of others. In the face of challenge that confronts us, like Jesus praying alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, we too are left alone with our faith, there is no instruction manual, and it is from this point we find comfort not in the physical things or the others around us, but in the Holy Word of God that promises us the comfort of grace and salvation.

In the face of challenge, we reach out *not* to the things in this world, rather, we reach out our hands in prayer, or we may also reach out our hands to receive the very body and blood of the individual who has taken our ills and made them his own and now frees us all from them.

I do not hate my mother and father, my wife or my children. I do not hate my brothers nor life itself, but I do love the Lord, but I know I can never love the Lord as much as God loves us all and makes His love known through His only Son Jesus Christ who is the individual who makes that love for father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself possible and even greater when we understand the love God has and makes known for us all.

² *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4, Discipleship*. Translated from the German Edition, Edited by Martin Kuske† and Ilse Tödt. Minneapolis: Fortress Press paperback edition: 2003. Chapter Five, Discipleship and the Individual, page 92.

We are not being called to hate family and those most dear to us, we are being called to love God more. But since we cannot, God loves us all more than we can ever begin to fully understand. God has made that love known in the promise of forgiveness and salvation that is Jesus Christ. May this love given to us in Jesus Christ fill our hearts beyond the capacity of our understanding and guide us throughout our days of death and adversity until we are all called into the perfection of new life in His glorious Kingdom...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.