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Phoenix Community Church
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The Price of Discipleship

Luke 14:25-33

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Today's scripture is a difficult teaching. Not difficult to understand or make sense of like many parts of the Bible. But difficult because we don't usually want to hear it.

To follow Jesus...
To be a Christian...
To live for the realm of God...
To live for justice...
To live for love...
is to give up everything.

This is what Jesus is warning us. Jesus seems to be telling us that we need a commitment to finishing the discipleship journey once we start down that path or not beginning it at all. Following Jesus is an all or nothing proposition.¹

To be a disciple of Jesus' message, of God's love, is to take a risk. The rewards are great:
Love,
hope,
joy,
peace of heart,
community.

We might even claim that these benefits are necessary parts of a happy life. To live in the realm of God is to realize these things in our lives.

But living in the realm of God is also to work for justice in the world.

It is to be willing to share God's message of love and justice with others.

It means putting yourself on the line.

To be willing to look stupid.

To be willing to be rejected.

Jesus was killed because he challenged the political and religious status quo of his time. And he asks us to know the costs before following in his footsteps. He asks us to know what we're getting into.

For those of us who are gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender, we have been through a similar process of cost analysis. We had to assess the costs of coming out. The costs of being ourselves.

My personal experience is that I didn't choose to be gay, but I did make choices about when and how to come out. However, I can choose to be a Christian or not. And Jesus tells us to make an informed choice.

To be a radical, which is what a Christian is, may cause friction with family and friends. It may get us into trouble with the authorities, especially if our idea of what being Christian means isn't the same as those in power.

Many of us are familiar with these types of dangers from our coming out processes. But being a Christian costs even more:

- it means rejecting materialism and other forms of idolatry;
- putting God first, before all else;

¹ Jeannine K. Brown at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/5/2010#tab4

- it may even mean rejection by many in the gay community who have been hurt by the institutional church and Christian extremists;

Jesus is speaking to the importance of loyalty and allegiance to God over all other competing loyalties, including family, self-interest, and possessions.²

But let's also note that Jesus is not really saying that we should hate anyone. When Jesus tells us to hate our family, he is using hyperbolic language as he does frequently in his teachings.

This becomes clear when we compare this saying in Luke with Matthew's version. Matthew quotes Jesus as saying "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."

The use of the word "hate" in Luke might also reflect an idiom that comes from Hebrew. In a couple of places in the Hebrew Bible we find the word hate used where it is clear that the issue is one of preference or allegiance.

Likewise, Jesus doesn't seem to really be calling his followers to hate their families in terms of an emotional response; instead, he calls for undivided loyalty to himself and to God above family loyalties.³

And this commitment is something I have to make a choice to follow through on. I can choose to follow the teachings of Jesus. I can choose if I want to be on a journey to know God, to be in relationship with God.

But if there are such steep potential costs involved, why do I want to be a disciple of Jesus?

Well, in this relationship with God, in this quest to love God, neighbor, and self, I find those benefits I mentioned earlier: community, hope, love, support.

But this quest is not just between me and God. There is also that love the neighbor part. To be a Christian comes with the responsibility to love and care for all people – to be an advocate for justice – to be compassionate.

As the theologian Frederick Buechner has put it: "Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity for feeling what it is like to live inside somebody else's skin. It is the knowledge that there can never really be any peace and joy for me until there is peace and joy finally for you too."

This call to justice, to do unto others as we would have them do to us, is scary. It would be nice to just attend church on Sunday, to do some reading, pray once in awhile. And all of that stuff is necessary.

And for the most part, that's what it has meant for me to be a Christian. I've never been very good at taking risks, putting myself on the line. I get nervous, I think I can't do it.

I think that's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem "Who Am I?" that we heard earlier in the service resonated for me.

Who am I? Am I this person who is full of doubts, wants "things" - possessions – to distract me from the stresses of life, and who sometimes wants to just run and hide?

Or am I this other person who wants to be a disciple of Christ, a Christian, a lover of God and neighbor, and an advocate for justice?

² Jeannine K. Brown at http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=9/5/2010#tab4

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Often, what we really hope for from God is that God will take care of everything for us. We are happy to concede all power to God, disavowing having any power ourselves.

But, we are in relationship with God, with each other, and with creation. To become a partner with God requires taking responsibility in the relationship. Many people don't want that responsibility. Many people want to be let off the hook of choosing a more adult relationship with God.⁴

As Christians, we are called to act.

- To be loving and compassionate with each other.
- To fight against hunger, poverty, racism, homophobia, religious hypocrisy and abuses, and whatever other injustices we encounter and wherever we find them.
- We are called to speak out and to act.

And we are called to let the world know that there is an alternate way. There is the way of Jesus, of Christianity, and that is a way of love and hope and justice.

That means we may need to speak up about our faith. Just as we come out as gay or lesbian or bisexual or transgender because it is a meaningful part of who we are, we need to come out as Christians.

And the good thing is that everyone can become a Christian. This way is open to all. But we have to let the world know that. Let them know that if they don't already have a spiritual path, that this path is available to all. And that it is a way of love.

And that is important – Christianity is a way of love. We need to correct the image that many people have. The

image we get in the popular media or that is put out by many institutions of Christianity is not, I believe, an accurate picture of what Christianity is supposed to be. So we need to offer an alternative picture. A picture of love.

How do we do these things? How do we offer that alternative picture? How do we fight for justice? Work to build the realm of God here on earth?

Perhaps that means writing letters to the editors, signing petitions, speaking out to friends and family. Perhaps that means picking one or two issues and concentrating on them.

That is something we can do as individuals and something we can do as a church. And I have some homework for us all: I would challenge each of us to think of something we can be doing individually and corporately.

It might be something new and exciting. Or it might be something that you are already doing but maybe it calls for a renewed and larger commitment. And then share those ideas with each other.

Perhaps we could make a concentrated effort to better support a local organization such as Loaves and Fishes or Ministry with Community. Not only with money and gifts but with our time and talents as well. Or perhaps we might work on some project to care for our earth in a meaningful way.

I'm not sure what ideas we can come up with, but I bet there are some great things we can do with the resources we have, however meager we might think they are. If we give what we have to God's use, God will use it and multiply it.

⁴ Rick Marshall at <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-09-05.shtml>

I also have a second request for you tonight. As an insert in your bulletin is a famous prayer by St. Francis. This is a prayer that I love: "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace..."

I would like to ask each of us to take that prayer home and read it once a day during the rest of this month of September. Preferably read it out loud, savoring each and every word. I believe this prayer speaks to what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and so I ask that we pray this prayer for a month and see what effect it has on our lives.

You might have noticed that I've used a couple of quotes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the bulletin tonight and we also heard one of his poems.

Bonhoeffer's story is a very intriguing one. He was a minister and theologian during the time of Nazi Germany. He was one of the few in the German church to actively oppose Hitler.

Bonhoeffer was executed for participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler – not the typical thing we would think a follower of Jesus would do. Which brings up some fascinating and difficult questions about the role of Christians. Some of these questions, such as the cost of discipleship we have touched upon but others we will have to save for another time.

I want to end this message tonight with some words that you may have heard before from Bonhoeffer's friend Martin Niemöller. These words refer to the apathy and fear involved in not speaking and acting out for justice.

*First they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out -
because I was not a Communist.*

*Then they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out -
because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out -
because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak for me.⁵*

To be a disciple of the way of Jesus is to live in the realm of God. To live with hope and joy; loving God, neighbor, and self; speaking and acting out for justice.

But to be a disciple of the way of Jesus also comes with responsibility and costs. Jesus asks us to know those costs – and then jump in feet first. Because the costs not to act, not to speak up, not to love and not to be compassionate are too high.

This message tonight is not meant to scare you or guilt you or depress you. There is a cost to following the Way of Love. And following the way can be difficult.

But the rewards are great – to realize the realm of God. And God is and will always be here to love us and support us and guide us.

May you feel God's love, live in God's love, and share God's love. May we all be God's instrument for love and justice. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.awesomestories.com/religion/bonhoeffer/politically-incorrect-heroes>