

September 5, 2004

"Costly Choices"

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 14:25-33

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By this time in his earthly ministry Jesus was a bonafide rock star. Word of his miraculous healings and authoritative exorcisms of demons had spread far and wide around ancient Palestine. If this were happening today CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC would all have embedded reporters with the Jesus campaign and the National Enquirer and the Star would be fighting each other for first person accounts from the 12 disciples. Every day the crowds following Jesus became larger and larger as he moved closer and closer to Jerusalem. Now since we know the rest of the story and since Jesus knew the rest of the story – we know that Jesus was heading toward the culmination of his earthly ministry and a humiliating death. The crowds didn't know this. They were high on the events surrounding Jesus and as each day passed they were surer that this was the promised Messiah who was going to Jerusalem to overturn the Roman authorities and claim Jerusalem for the Kingdom of God. They wanted to make sure they were there to witness this and perhaps have a claim on the new world order Jesus would establish.

Jesus, of course, knew all this and used this discourse found in today's Gospel lesson to set them straight about what it really meant to follow him. He did not want them to be misled about what being a disciple of Jesus was all about.

He tells them if you want to be my disciple you must hate your family and your life. Then he tells them that being a disciple of his is costly and involves cross bearing. And then, Jesus tells the crowd that they could never hope to be one of his disciples unless they were willing to give up all their possessions. Wow, these are words that could deter even the most rabid fan from following Jesus into Jerusalem. But one thing we need to remember as we hear these words is that the crowd, coming out of a very different cultural milieu than we do, heard these words differently than we do. Ancient Middle Eastern speech is full of hyperbole. It contains very little sense of verbal nuance. It is always vivid in its expression and black and white in its pronouncements. The crowd following Jesus understood this. We don't always.

Jesus is trying to explain three things about following him to this crowd of hangers-ons. First, people who follow Jesus find their identity in being adopted children of God and in being citizens of the Kingdom of God, not in anything else. In first century Palestine family was the place where one's identity was established. Other people knew who you were when they knew what family you came from. And much of what one became as an adult was determined by one's family and its status in society. And much the same thing could be said about families today in our culture. While we live in a society where it is possible for some to move away from their family status economically and educationally there is still a sense

that we can never move away from the psychological identity our families give us. Much of who we are is formed in our families. I don't think Jesus is telling us that discipleship requires that we literally hate our fathers and mothers – but he is telling us that we must forsake that first identity as a member of a human family remembering that as a disciple of his we are first God's child with a psyche that is formed in the image of Christ with God's values, not the image of our father or mother with his or her values.

Possessions are, also, a way of achieving and broadcasting personal identity. In Jesus' day people knew something about you if they knew how many sheep you owned or if you had slaves. And today is no different. We use our possessions to help other people know something about us. Designer labels on our clothes, shoes, bags, and linens help people to understand what socio-economic bracket we come from or aspire to or what kind of taste we have. The kind of car we drive tells people how many children we have or, perhaps, if we're going through a mid-life crisis or not. For some, the kinds of clothes one wears signals what music genres are important and valued or the social group one belongs to. So Jesus is saying – “if you choose to follow me – don't use possessions to define who you are. My disciples live in such a way that people know they are my disciples by the way they live not by what they own.”

The second thing I think Jesus is saying is that someone who follows Jesus should only look to Jesus for security and fulfillment not to family and possessions. In Jesus' time family was the place of economic and social security. There was no cultural or public safety net for those who lost their families. And there was little way for one to leave his family to strike out on one's own or rise above the social strata of one's family. Therefore, it was easy to fall into the idea that family was everything and that all of one's allegiance should be paid to it because it was the place of ultimate security and personal fulfillment. And it's not so different in our day. We're not necessarily as economically and socially dependent on our own individual, extended families as people were in Jesus' time but we have taken the concept of family and come dangerously close to elevating it to a “god” status. An idealized sense of family has become to some that thing which ensures our security as a people, that thing that provides the stability that will save us so therefore, our first concern and allegiance should always be to the family. Well, Jesus is saying no to that. Jesus is saying people who follow him understand that while family is important it is not that thing that gives us ultimate security, fulfillment, and salvation. Only God can do that.

Likewise possessions can have the same effect on us. We look to the things we have to keep us safe and make us happy. If we just had a house with one more bedroom in a slightly better neighborhood then we'd never need worry again about the security of our families. If I lost that twenty pounds or had my nose done I know that I'd be a happier and more content person. If I could just afford that new Kate Spade bag I know I'd feel better about myself and be a better person. Well, the thing about looking to things for our fulfillment, happiness, and

security is that they are truly false gods. They entice us with promises of delivering what we've convinced ourselves they can deliver and then they fail us. But what do humans generally do when false gods fail. Do we turn our back on them and search for a true God? No, what we usually do is go after more false gods, more possessions, which take more of our time, money, and devotion. Jesus knew this about us. Jesus knew that possessions have the ability to turn our time and energy away from the things that truly provide salvation, security, and fulfillment – the things of God. So what Jesus is saying to the crowd is that people who follow him are not possessed by their possessions. They do not believe their possessions can do for them things only God can do. They are possessed, instead, by a passion for working in concert with God to bring about God's kingdom living in a world of God's values.

The third point Jesus wants the crowd to understand is that following him is costly. That's why he tells the story about the man who built the tower making sure he has enough money to finish the project and the story of the king who thinks seriously about whether or not he has enough troops to actually defeat the enemy before going to war. Jesus says that those who don't count the cost before entering into big projects will look foolish when they are not able to finish what they started. Jesus wants people to know what they are getting into when they decide to follow him. He does not want people to get carried away by delirious enthusiasm because he has done a few miracles and told some good stories. He wants people to know that following him is not always easy. He wants people to know that following him is not always fun. Thus, he invokes the image of carrying a cross – something he knew he would be doing literally in just a short time.

Now this is not a familiar image to us but it was to the people Jesus was talking to. The occupying Romans crucified a lot of people – so those in the crowd were probably used to seeing men carrying heavy wooden crosses through the streets of Jerusalem or other cities. And they knew what the crosses were for. With warnings about showing too much allegiance to families and possessions and pictures of being weighted down with heavy crosses it seems that Jesus is trying to make being a disciple of his the most difficult thing human beings could ever do. And, perhaps it is.

Dallas Willard, a Christian and professor of philosophy at UCLA, defines a disciple in this way: "A disciple or apprentice is simply someone who has decided to be with another person under appropriate conditions in order to become capable of doing what that person does or to become what that person is." Then, he goes on to say that to specifically be a disciple of Jesus means that ". . . I am learning from Jesus to live my life as he would live life if he were I. I am not necessarily learning to do everything he did, but I am learning how to do everything I do in the manner in which he did all that he did."

Now some of us may be breathing a sigh of relief as we listen to that definition of discipleship because on face value Dallas Willard's definition of being a disciple of Jesus seems a lot easier than Jesus' definition of being a disciple of Jesus.

But is it? I think the key to Dr. Willard's definition is in that last phrase "how to do everything I do in the manner in which he did all that he did." What is that manner that in which Jesus did everything? Well, he loved his enemies. Even as he was hanging on the cross he asked God the father to forgive them. He made time in his busy schedule for children and those whom conventional society had written off as contemptible, unclean, or less than important. He sought time alone to rejuvenate himself and communicate with God. He was never afraid to speak the truth about hypocrisy and injustice where ever he saw it. He wasn't afraid to say things straight. He stood up to the presence of evil. He was willing to do humble things only a servant would do like wash his disciple's feet and make breakfast for them on the beach. He knew what it meant to have his identity anchored in being the Son of God. He had a clear sense of his mission and didn't allow things like possessions and family to get him off task. And he allowed himself to suffer the most humiliating and terrifying of deaths, a crucifixion. This is the manner in which Jesus lived – quite a model for us to emulate.

Our Old Testament lesson for today is from a passage in Deuteronomy where God offers the Israelite's a choice between life and prosperity or death and adversity. Choosing life, God says, means obeying my commandments, loving me and walking in my ways. To choose death, God says, means turning your heart away from me and bowing down to serve other gods. God urges the Israelite's to choose life. And that's exactly what Jesus is urging the crowd to do. Choose to follow me, he says, but know that it won't be easy.

As I was writing this sermon over the last week or so I was reminded that the word "gospel" means good news and that Jesus came to bring to all creation the good news of the kingdom of God. And I thought where is the good news in this passage from Luke – where is the good news in this sermon. Hate your family, carry your cross, get rid of all your possessions, count the cost of following me, says Jesus to the crowd. This doesn't really sound like good news to us and maybe didn't sound like good news to the crowd surrounding Jesus that day either. But it is. Every day each of us is faced with choices to follow Jesus or not. And when we make the choice to follow Jesus we have ultimately chosen the way of life. Every time we make choices to be generous with our time, money, and ourselves rather than make choices based on personal self-interest we are choosing to be Jesus' disciple and we are choosing life. Every time we make choices based on knowing that our identity, salvation, security and fulfillment are in our adoption as children of God rather than following the glittering enticements of our false and utterly impotent gods of choice we are choosing life. And every time we make a choice to follow Jesus the light and life of the kingdom of God pierces our fallen world and illuminates the way of God to those around us. Every time we choose God's path and not our own we strike a blow against the evil that surrounds us. This is, indeed, good news.

And there's more good news. Jesus never said we had to do this by ourselves. The same Jesus who said these words we've looked at this morning also

reminded us that the same God who clothes the lilies also clothes us. This is the same Jesus who described himself as the good shepherd loving his sheep even to the point of dying for them and told a story of the shepherd who owned 100 sheep leaving the herd to find that lost 1 likening that to God's care for the people. Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy. Jesus never said it would be. He went to great pains to describe how hard it would be. But each time we're faced with the choice of God's way of life or evil's way of death – Jesus stands beside us helping us to make the costly choice of life. Whenever we choose to live our life in the manner of Jesus we, as I've said from this pulpit before, may not be comfortable, but we might be glorious.