

Sermon by pastor Jouko

Zion Lutheran Church, Sault Ste. Marie

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Deuteronomy 30:15–20; Philemon 1–21; Luke 14:25–33

What a gospel reading we have today! At least no one can blame Jesus for trying to attract people to follow him by giving them false promises of a rosy and brilliant future, no. But isn't he going a bit too far, what he says in the gospel: 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. We remember his words as he says in Matthew 11: 28 Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Why are his words now so different?

As we see in the gospels, Jesus never needed to try to persuade people to come to him. As he went around teaching and healing, huge crowds always followed him. Already shortly after he had begun his public ministry we are told in the gospels that his fame spread throughout the surrounding regions and people came from everywhere to listen to him and to be cured from their illnesses. He was clearly a celebrity of his time.

As he was continuing his journey toward Jerusalem we are told that large crowds were traveling with him. Easter was approaching and therefore there were lots of pilgrims also in the crowds, who were heading toward Jerusalem to celebrate Easter there.

As people had seen the miracles Jesus did and heard his teaching, they were very excited about him. Their opinions varied quite a bit on who Jesus really was, but they liked what they saw and heard from him. Again and again Luke mentions in the gospel how people praised God for all the good things they saw Jesus doing.

We need to see the harsh words Jesus said in the gospel in the context of this great excitement of the people. As it has been mentioned several times before, Jesus knew well what the purpose of his journey to Jerusalem was. He was on his way to be crucified and to die there, but the crowd thought he was on his way to a victory and a crown.

By saying those harsh words Jesus wanted to curb their enthusiasm and also to make it clear to them that in order to become his disciple it was not enough just to travel with him on the road.

But aren't those words still a bit too hard and even in contradiction to his other teaching in the bible. How can he ask anyone to hate their parents, spouse, brothers and sisters, even their children? Didn't Jesus teach us to love even our enemies and isn't the fourth commandment about honouring your parents.

Yes, all that is true. The fourth commandment goes: Honour your father and your mother, and Jesus taught us to love our enemies, but he also said, as we may have heard in the gospel reading a few Sundays ago, that his person would also bring division between people even within families.

In order to understand Jesus' words correctly we need to know that in Semitic languages exaggerating expressions were fairly common. The scholars have named such a way of talking as "exaggeration-for-effect". So what Jesus is actually saying is not that in order to become his disciples we should literally hate our closest family members, but that we should set our priorities of life into a correct order. Becoming his disciple means a commitment above all other commitments, including commitment to family.

The gospel of Matthew records the words of Jesus in a bit different way. In Matthew 10:38 Jesus says: 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. So it is about the priorities in our lives.

But still the question that emerges from today's gospel is a tough one: What is the top priority in our lives? Are we able to say with apostle Paul:

whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Phil 3:7,8). What caused such a radical change of priorities in Paul's life? The reason was his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and the call he received from him to become his disciple. The love and forgiveness Paul, the former persecutor experienced as he encountered Christ was so abundant and overflowing that it made it easy for him to leave his "old life" and old values behind and to make following Jesus as his disciple the top priority in his life.. In the same chapter a little bit later Paul explains why this dramatic change was possible. He says: , Because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I hear the emphasis on the word me. Paul never forgot, what kind of a person he was before Christ called him. In 1 Tim 1 he recalls, how he, who was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence received God's mercy. He says that the grace of our Lord overflowed for him with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. And why? He explains a little bit later: ¹⁶But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him.

Paul had learned to know that price Christ was willing to give for a wretch like him as he died on the cross, was so much higher than he could ever give back to him. Therefore it was easy to leave his old life and his old priorities behind and follow Christ as his disciple. Numerous Christians throughout the centuries have experienced the same: What we receive in Christ and through him continually in our lives is so much more than what we can give – or should I say rather give up, as we accept his call to follow him.

What Jesus is emphasizing in the gospel is, that there is a price tag in becoming his disciple and following him in our daily lives. Even our closest relatives and friends may not understand us and our decisions, why we want to do certain things because of our new priorities. And there may be situations, when we are truly asked, what is the top priority in our lives and are we ready to pay the price no matter what may come.

With those two examples in the gospel Jesus underlines the importance of counting the costs, lest our discipleship receive a sorrowful tag "unfinished" or "uncompleted". But as we consider these things we should never forget how much more he was willing to pay for us as he redeemed us on the cross.

Peter remind us of this in his 1 letter as he says: remember that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the well known German theologian wrote the book "the cost of discipleship" in the late 1930's in Germany he wasn't aware that the cost of his own discipleship would be to die as a martyr.

In his book Bonhoeffer talks a lot about discipleship, what it is and what it isn't. He also talks about two different forms of grace, which he names "cheap grace" and "costly grace". According to him the cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living Christ. On the other hand, according to him, the costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock again and again.

He says that such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and 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. Above all,

it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: " What has cost God so much, cannot be cheap for us."

After almost eighty years, Bonhoeffer's words are still thought provoking and full of weight. It is good to reflect on them today as we think about our own calling to the discipleship of Jesus and the possible costs that may come along with it. But as we think about it , wasn't it really something, that he was willing to pay such a high price for us, for you and for me. And that he still wants to keep us his own, even though we often struggle with our priorities and make wrong decisions and mistakes. He continues to forgive us when we need his forgiveness, he cleanses us and gives us a new grace every day. Aren't these good enough reasons, to become his followers and to continue as his disciples and to wrestle with those priorities so that we could learn to put them more and more in the order that is in accordance with our Saviour's will. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord you ask us to make choices in our lives today. Help us to set our priorities according to your will. We thank you for choosing us to become your disciples. You gave the greatest sacrifice on the cross for us, help us to submit ours lives into your service, where ever and which ever way you want to use us as your disciples and your stewards. Amen.