

THE CALL OF DISCIPLESHIP: STICKER SHOCK

LUKE 9:57-62

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I want to begin a summer sermon series today – “The Call of Discipleship.” Our lectionary readings for summer take us through Luke’s account of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem.

The context for these lessons in discipleship, the classroom, if you will, is the road. Jesus travels from Galilee to Jerusalem and the cross as he moves down the Jordan River Valley to the big city.

Specifically, what I’d like to look at this morning is the “cost of discipleship” – as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it – which for the would-be followers in today’s story involves sticker shock.

Before we even get to those would be followers, the story begins with Jesus’ decision, in Luke’s wonderful phrase, to “set his face toward Jerusalem.” As soon as he does, of course, the forces of darkness rise up and challenge him.

We’ve all been there. You weigh some important decision. You could do this or you could do that. You mull it over, talk to people, pray about it. Finally, you set your face, you decide. No sooner do you do than something goes wrong. Some turn of events that leads you to wondering: “is the right thing to do? Maybe I should hold off, sleep on it, reconsider.”

That’s what happens to Jesus today. No sooner does he decide to go to Jerusalem to confront the powers of this world than a quaint little Samaritan village turns ugly. Like that little southern hamlet in which two northern college kids get arrested for driving a car with a New York license plates in the movie, “My Cousin Vinnie.”

Luke refers to moments such as this as “opportune times for the devil.” Back in the wilderness when Jesus resists the evil one Luke says Satan left him until an opportune time. That is, a time of weakness or vulnerability or depravation or self-doubt.

Periods of transition are often by definition “opportune times” for Satan.

Opportunities for that little voice of self doubt or self interest to persuade you against doing the right thing. The little voice that tries to get you to not do the thing that will bring God’s kingdom a little closer in some corner of your life.

But Jesus does not succumb to the disciples’ desire for revenge. He is resolute. He is not distracted from his mission. And right there in Luke 9:56 is one of the most important moments in the bible. Jesus, says Luke matter of factly, goes on to the next village.

Sometimes those next steps after encountering our first disappointment to bring about some important change, are the most important ones we can make. Not because they accomplish anything in themselves but because they keep us headed toward our goal.

Maybe some of us today are at a point where we need to go on to the next village rather than turn back in despair or give up, saying ‘what’s the use?’

But just because you decide to go on to the next village doesn't necessarily mean that everything is now going to work out. These would-be followers Jesus encounters were not Peter, James and John – they were more like Moe, Larry and Curly. Disappointing.

And here is a good place to begin our series – exploring, in a sense, what discipleship is not. Because the other lessons from Luke on discipleship which we will read this summer define what discipleship is in some tangible way.

One of the best analyses of the 9th chapter of Luke – where we encounter cheap grace or fraudulent discipleship is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, The Cost of Discipleship. Perhaps you remember Bonhoeffer, the young, brilliant Lutheran pastor who was arrested and executed two weeks before the end of the war for participating in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He came to the U.S. during the war, before his arrest, and could have remained here with a lucrative teaching position at Union Seminary in New York but he was lead to return to Germany to live out his faith.

The first would-be follower in today's story is enamored of Jesus, says Bonhoeffer. "I will follow you where ever you go," he says, like a rock-star groupie.

Jesus hasn't even asked this man to follow him. His offer rings a little naïve. A little too easy. So Jesus gives the man a reality check. "Foxes have holes, the birds of heaven have nests but the son of man has no where to lay his head."

But there's more to it. What Jesus tells the man is that he is going to suffer and die. No one can call himself or herself to such a destiny, says Bonhoeffer. A destiny like that, total purpose and sacrifice, must call you.

The second would-be follower, the one Jesus does invite to follow him, wants to bury his father first. He is bound by the law. He knows what he wants and what he must do. Let me first fulfill the law then follow, he proposes, like a buttoned-down organization man.

Jesus' response isn't for the sake of the organization at all. It supercedes the law, "let the dead bury the dead" but "as for you go, proclaim the kingdom of God." If on the one hand we cannot call ourselves to such a destiny as Jesus' suffering and death, on the other hand once such a destiny calls us it takes precedence over everything else. Even the law. Jesus was at odds on many occasions with the law, just as his followers have been through the centuries.

Surely this great nation needs faithful people who are law abiding but we also need faithful who are willing to break the law for the right reasons.

Finally, the third would-be disciple, like the first, thinks following Jesus means he can make the offer on his own – like choosing a career. But there is a difference between the two. The first was just naïve. The second is bold enough to stipulate his own terms.

"I will follow you Lord, but first let me say farewell to those at my home," he speaks like a shrewd politician covering his flank. But Jesus says to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

There is an inconsistency in the man's offer. Discipleship for him is something which can only be realized when certain conditions have been fulfilled. This man places himself at Jesus' disposal but at the same time retains the right to dictate his own terms.¹

One preacher says Jesus would have made a terrible parish minister because he said such outrageous, off-putting things – like he does to these well-intentioned followers.

Parish ministers, however, want to make the church easy and accessible for seekers.

We want to find out what everyone's needs are then try to meet them with our programming. A strategy dangerously close to the one politicians use.

And the church that succeeds is not only the one that makes it easy to get in the door but makes people want to stay. We aim to make things relevant and interesting, even entertaining and fun. Avoid “boring” at all costs, especially with teenagers or congregants who doze off in worship.ⁱⁱ

I am not saying these things are bad. But on the other hand they are not exactly what Jesus was about either. Instead of making discipleship easy, he seems on occasion to make it hard. Instead of giving us a discount, the price he quotes causes sticker shock.

Rather than making discipleship fit into our lives and needs and expectations he seems to want us to change our lives and needs and expectations.

The only reason I can think of why Jesus is so hard-nosed is because he wants us to know that in our relationship to God the most important thing is to give ourselves until nothing is left over. Bonhoeffer says the first step to discipleship is to leave everything. Matthew leaves his collection agency, Peter his fishing nets. We can withhold nothing. You know you've become a disciple when you've left something dear behind.

Not until we give up trying to control or dictate the terms on which we will follow Jesus will our following him breathe life into our weary souls. Not until we “let go and let God” will our priorities and commitments line up the way they should.

The thing that distinguishes a Thomas More or Martin Luther or Bishop Tutu or Rosa Parks is they were each clear that following Christ was their first priority.

It's not that Jesus is uncaring that he makes discipleship hard for us. It's that he cares enough to tell us what's really required. He wants us to know, says Barbara Brown Taylor, that following him isn't about creating a safe, caring environment where people's needs will be met so much as it is about living such a different way of life that those in power in our families, in our churches, in our nation may get mad enough to kill us.

Discipleship costs all that we have, all that we love, all that we are. Jesus doesn't want us to be fooled about that.ⁱⁱⁱ

Sometimes we get lulled into thinking that church is the place we come to recharge our batteries, find a port in the storm, a refuge and sanctuary from the day to day stresses.

It is and should be. But if that is all it is then whatever else we are doing here, we are not making disciples. The goal that lies before us, the goal we set before little Matthew Cone this morning, is to learn to give ourselves to God so completely that nothing is held back. To know that is the beginning of discipleship.

Discipleship isn't for everyone. Maybe we should remember that. But those who do follow him, even intermittently, know in their hearts they are who they are and they do what they do not by their strength or resolution or courage but by God's. And that makes all the difference. Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: Macmillan, 1937, 1973) 64-87.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, vol.29, no.3, July – September 2001, 5.

ⁱⁱⁱ Willimon, 5.