

“Fair Warning”
Luke 14:25–33
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Years ago, I had a music colleague who was friends with the music director at the Crystal Cathedral. They sometimes talked about the similarities and differences between the two churches they served. One of the greatest differences was that Robert Schuller would not allow any music that was not upbeat and peppy, even in Lent. It’s difficult to imagine happy-clappy music on Maundy Thursday or Good Friday, but Schuller began that congregation by going door-to-door and asking people two questions — what do you need from a church, and what do you never want to hear from a church. People wanted to hear only heartwarming and uplifting messages. So, that is what they got.

It made me wonder if there was scripture that was forbidden too. Music can be melancholy, tragic, or unsettling, but so can scripture. Thomas Jefferson famously cut out parts of the Bible, and while we may consider that act sacrilegious, we all have our Bible within the Bible and thus parts that we edit out for all practical purposes. Much of Leviticus — let’s be honest! Almost all of Joshua — did God really tell the Israelites to commit genocide? A good bit of Paul, though not the letter to Philemon which we have read today. Even some passages about Jesus are just not very heartwarming or uplifting, like our reading from Luke.

What are we to make of these words about hating father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters? Does Jesus really expect us to give up all of our possessions? This may be the gospel of Christ, but we choke on the words — praise be to Christ! It’s in the Bible, but why read these words in worship, and for goodness’ sake, why preach on them? Well, we read them because they are in the Bible, and since we have read them, I need to say something about them.

The usual beginning place in trying to find something redemptive in a text like this is to look for some explanation that softens the message. Matthew does this, having Jesus say that those who love family members

more than him are not worthy of him (Matthew 10:37). That is gentler than telling us we must hate our families.

In addition, Yale Divinity School Homiletics Professor Carolyn J. Sharp points out that in Jewish tradition, the word “hate” is not only used to describe animosity between enemies. It is “also used in binary wisdom aphorisms employing ‘love’ and ‘hate’ as paradigmatic responses of discernment: the wicked are said to hate discipline, justice, and knowledge, while the righteous hate wickedness, falsehood, and gossip (*workingpreacher.org*).” Jesus is not counseling hostility toward family. He is talking about priorities, saying nothing comes before him.

But while these efforts to soften the message may be helpful, it could be that Jesus wants to be provocative. Union Presbyterian Seminary New Testament Professor John T. Carroll observes that “the priority of the realm of God is pictured in the most extreme terms imaginable (in these verses)... Jesus is challenging listeners to embrace a singular commitment and allegiance to him (*Luke*, New Testament Library, p. 307).” Why would Jesus do this? Why would he be so provocative? Because sometimes subtlety doesn’t work, like when the message is difficult, and the listeners don’t want to hear it.

Note how this passage begins and who the audience is. Luke says, “Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother... cannot be my disciple.’” Most people would be delighted to have a crowd and would do anything to keep one. Jesus is not most people. He is more insightful and laser-focused on his mission. He knows crowds have gathered because he has done miraculous things. In addition to teaching with wisdom and authority, he has performed one miracle after another, healing people, casting out evil spirits. Of course, he has gathered a crowd! But what do the people expect of him?

Jesus has no intention of becoming a travelling circus. He has no monkeys, elephants, or clowns. This is not some feel-good, power-of-positive-thinking crusade. Jesus is on his way to a cross and inviting people to follow him on a path of service and self-giving. So, in making the demanding nature of discipleship so clear — he and his way must come first — he is simply giving the people fair warning. There will be no bait and switch here. He wants them to know what they are saying “yes” to before

they say it. There is no way he can communicate this message to these people without being blunt. So, he is.

It's a bit like what the pastor who baptized me, Dr. Edwin Perry, said when I talked to him about making a profession of faith, being baptized, and joining the church. He said, "Don't do this unless you absolutely have to." It is not what most pastors say. It is not very gentle or encouraging, and most of us want as many people as possible to join. But perhaps it is what we ought to say or at least include in our teaching.

Baptism isn't just a way to join a nice family of people, though we do find community. Nor is it simply one get-out-of-hell-free card, though it is a sign of grace with which God claims us. It is also a commitment to Christ as the one we follow in the way of sacrificial love. In the waters of baptism, we confess Christ as Savior *and* Lord, which is why an old Southern preacher used to said, "If they come running like hogs after slop, it ain't the gospel!"

All Jesus does is give fair warning of this reality to people who need to hear it. You don't start building a tower, he says, unless you know you have what you need to complete it. You don't wage a war unless you have the resources to fight it. Don't become my disciple unless you are ready for all that it involves.

So, what does this mean for us? What does discipleship involve? Service, sacrifice, love, and putting Christ first, before all other loyalties, including our family and career, everything we own, even life itself. These loyalties don't always conflict with our loyalty to Jesus. And the truth is service and love, at times even sacrifice, are the means through which we find our deepest fulfillment.

Just ask anyone who has been on a mission trip to Honduras, Ukraine, or Kenya, or those who are going to Romania in October to help with food and supplies relief for Ukrainians. Ask anyone who has volunteered in the Clothing Ministry, on a Habitat House, with Family Promise, with Welcome House, or with And Also with 'Cue. Ask anyone who has given what they have in response to the war in Ukraine or the flooding in Kentucky or now in Pakistan. Anytime we put the needs of others before our own, we know a deep-down kind of joy.

So, Jesus' fair warning is a bit like what good D1 coaches say, even to the best high school athletics. "There are no guarantees. You will have work and sacrifice in many ways if you expect to play. But if that is for you, the sacrifice will be worth the effort, you be part of something great." Many times, putting Christ first requires something of us, but it is rewarding, and it doesn't feel like turning life upside down.

Other times it does. It certainly does for an early believer named Philemon. The story, at least part of it, is told in the short letter we have read today. The Apostle Paul pleads with his brother in Christ, Philemon, to treat Onesimus no longer as his slave but as his brother in Christ. Paul could demand that he do this, given his position, but he chooses to request strongly, and make no mistake, strength is needed because this will require a radical reordering of priorities for Philemon.

Slavery is an accepted institution in this time, though one we consider evil and oppressive today. We would like a straightforward word of condemnation from Paul, but there are limits on how much change even he can effect. Paul does tell Philemon to treat Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother which goes against cultural mores, economic principles, and family values. This is not a request for a little kindness or a new faith practice like joining a prayer group. This is a dramatic change about the core of daily life. Yet for Philemon, this is what discipleship requires. We don't know how the story ends, but if Philemon follows Paul's advice, his life is turned upside down.

Discipleship required something similar for a man named Clarence Jordan. He began an intentional Christian community in rural Georgia in 1942, a community where resources were shared and people of different races treated each other as brothers and sisters. As time passed and racial tensions grew, the community, Koinonia Farm, came under attack and so Clarence sought the help of his brother, Robert, who later became a state senator and justice of the Georgia Supreme Court.

When asked to help, Robert said, "Clarence, I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. Why, if I represented you, I might lose my job, my house, everything I've got." "*We* might lose everything too, Bob," said Clarence. "It's different for you," said Robert. "Why is it different?" asked Clarence, "I remember, it seems to me, you and I joined the church the same

Sunday as boys. I expect when we came forward the preacher asked me about the same question he did you. He asked me, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ What did you say?”

“I follow Jesus... up to a point,” said Robert. “Could that point by any chance be — the cross?” asked Clarence. “That’s right,” said Robert, “I follow him to the cross, but not *on* the cross. I’m not getting myself crucified.” Then I don’t believe you’re a disciple,” said Clarence, “You’re an admirer of Jesus, but not a disciple of his. I think you ought to go back to the church you belong to, and tell them you’re an admirer not a disciple.” “Well now,” said Robert, “If everyone who felt like I do did that, we wouldn’t *have* a church, would we?” “The question,” Clarence said, “is, ‘Do you have a church?’” (James McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp. 127-128).

It is a provoking exchange that points to the kinds of challenges we face when our loyalties to good things like families and career come into conflict with our loyalty to Christ. It may concern some matter of discrimination based on race or gender or anything else, or things like honesty and integrity. Or it may involve taking risks for others.

I recall the former head of the Baptist Convention of Liberia, who had just walked to safety in the Ivory Coast with his wife and daughter under the cover of darkness to avoid being killed in the Civil War, insisting on volunteering in the most violent housing project in Richmond, Virginia, because he felt compelled to serve people in need. Had he survived a war in Liberia only to die in one of our cities? Sometimes we are forced to make a difficult choice. Discipleship can require much of us.

I realize this may feel heavy. When we were working on our mission, vision, and core values statement in another setting, a dear friend there questioned a value that said discipleship is demanding. “We are not demanding,” he said, “We are inviting and encouraging, but we have no right to demand anything of anyone!” “You are absolutely right,” I said, “I agree with you completely. We have no right to make demands. But Jesus does.”

Jesus does, but at least he gives us fair warning.