

“What in the World Is Jesus Saying Here?”

Luke 14:25–33

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Some Sundays the lectionary includes multiple texts that are intriguing for ministers and congregations—we are more than ready to explore them—other Sundays the passages make us want to run for cover. This is one of these latter Sundays.

The reading from Jeremiah seems friendly enough. We like the image of God at the potter’s wheel, shaping us like clay. “Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way! Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.” But the emphasis here is on judgment, God getting frustrated with having to rework the clay over and over again. Furthermore, we think of this imagery in personal terms, but the prophet is speaking to the nation. Are we willing to hear a call to repentance for the nation or is that too political?

The reading from Philemon has certain possibilities. Paul is pleading for his friend to treat a slave named Onesimus kindly because he is a Christian and has been helpful to Paul. Paul could demand that Philemon do so, and says as much, but he chooses to make this a request. It is a fine example of kindness, diplomacy, and persuasion. I have explored these themes before. But nowhere does Paul challenge the institution of slavery or suggest that Onesimus be set free. Perhaps we should not judge Paul by our standards, but this is scripture, God is not bound by time. Why is there no clear word of judgment on slavery?

But challenging as they may be, these two texts are easy compared to the reading from Luke in which Jesus says, “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... none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.” Do we have any inerrantists among us? Has anyone taken these words literally? Most teenagers say they hate their parents, and their parents may feel the same way about them, but they don’t mean it. They are just frustrated.

What are we to do with these texts? We may feel like this is a great day to abandon the lectionary. Indeed, perhaps we should abandon it completely! There is a great deal of scripture that is not in the lectionary. But these texts are in the Bible. You did say, “Thanks be to God,” and “Praise be to you, O Christ,” after them, not very enthusiastically, but you did speak the words out loud.

And there is value in the discipline the lectionary imposes in pushing us to consider texts we might otherwise avoid. If nothing else, they remind us that scripture needs interpretation, and once we have read passages like this, we need to say something about them. This applies to all our readings, but especially to the reading from Luke.

What in the world is Jesus saying here? Does he really want us to hate the people in our families? Does he really want us to give away all our possessions? And if we refuse either demand, we aren’t his disciples? The normal interpretative move is to say that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. It is a literary device or a curse of his profession. We’ll come back to this. But if this is hyperbole, what is he saying?

The rest of the passage gives us a clue. Jesus says we need to know that there is a cost to discipleship, sometimes in relationships, sometimes in financial resources, but if he comes first, nothing else can come before our calling to follow him. Many of us may struggle to see how our love for Christ and our love for family could be in conflict. I do not. I came from a family in which becoming a Christian, and a minister at that, was out of step with where everyone else was. I was the oddball. We didn’t hate each other because of this, but it did create tension.

Some of you know what I mean. I am not the only one in this church who has experienced family conflict because of faith. We have people in our shared life who grew up in other parts of the world where becoming a Christian not only put them at risk of persecution but also alienated them from some family members. We also have people whose understanding of faith has evolved so much that simply believing some different things about Jesus and what it means to follow him has created family division. Taking seriously our calling to follow Jesus has costs. We may not hate family members, but we do encounter hostility.

I think of a conversation Clarence Jordan had with his brother Robert. Clarence had begun an intentional Christian community in rural Georgia in 1942, a community where resources were shared and people of different races treated each other as sisters and brothers. 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.

Robert said he couldn't help because he might lose everything, he had political aspirations. Clarence said he might lose everything too, but Robert said that was different. "Why is it different?" Clarence asked, "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 (that)." "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?'" (J. McClendon, *Biography as Theology*, pp. 127-128).

Robert no doubt thought his decision was valid because he was protecting his future calling, and who can say for sure what God's will is for someone else. But the conversation illustrates the way our understanding of Christian calling can create family tension.

It can also make demands on our use of money. Perhaps we need not sell all our possessions, but we are called to use all we have to extend God's realm. We tend to think of stewardship as what we give to the church, and this is part of the story. We will have a budget emphasis again this fall. It is one thing churches across all differences have in common. Ministry and missions depend on funding.

But Christian stewardship is about more than what we give the church. It's about what we do with all our money, indeed all our lives—

time, talent, and money. Since all we have is a gift, we are stewards of it, not owners, and God has a claim on how it is used.

One way to heed this calling is like Francis of Assisi who when he felt called by Christ, gave up all he had which, given the wealth of his family, was quite a lot. He renounced his inheritance, took off the clothes he was wearing, and walked out of town to begin a new life of simplicity and service. But not everyone will choose this path. Another way to heed this calling is to be intentional about using what we have to extend God's love and justice—caring for loved ones, reaching out to others, aiding the poor, supporting education, nurturing the created world, and supporting the mission of the church. This path is valid too.

This is what Jesus means when he talks about families and money. There are choices we make, our loyalty to him comes first, so there are costs. Why doesn't he just say this? Why does he speak in hyperbole? Anyone who claims to *know* the mind of Jesus is speaking in hyperbole. What I *suspect* is that he does this because we are quick to compromise.

We find explanations and excuses when he speaks in absolutes. We look for a way out or at least an easier way when he makes demands. What would we do if he made gentle suggestions? Moses comes down from the mountain with ten commandments, not an unknown number of recommendations! Discipleship is costly. Sometimes we can make accommodations or compromises; other times we cannot.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about this in *The Cost of Discipleship* published in 1937. He said that as a minister of the gospel he had to do more than teach, preach, and write. He had to act, take risks, even die if necessary, in light of what Hitler was doing, and in response to what God had done for him. As we know, all this he did. He was executed in the concentration camp in Flossenbug on April 9, 1945.

Costly grace is a treasure hidden in a field, Bonhoeffer wrote, for it we will sell all we have. It is costly because it costs us our life, but it is grace because it gives us the only true life. It cost God the life of a Son and what costs God this much cannot be cheap for us (pp. 47-48).

Indeed. So, what might current realities and the gospel demand of us now? This is the question we need to ask. This is what Jesus is saying.