

*Deuteronomy 30:15-20*

*Psalm 1*

*Philemon 1-21*

*Luke 14: 25-33*

### Counting the Cost

Today we have an “extreme” Jesus speaking to us. His message is one that stings and bites. It’s challenging and forceful. Here, Jesus gives us three demanding prescriptions for becoming his disciples on this earth. And at first glance, they might not reassure you at all. To be Jesus’ followers, you must:

- 1) Hate your mother, father, spouse, children, siblings and even your life.
- 2) You must renounce all your possessions.
- 3) Carry your own cross just as Jesus carried his.
- 4)

Sounds almost too bad to be true, doesn’t it? Being a disciple is not only inconvenient—it’s nearly impossible.

#### **Hate your mother and father...**

To understand this better, we need to see this saying in a wider biblical context. Biblical scholars tell us that throughout the Bible there is a tendency to use the word “hate” when what is really meant is a secondary form of love. So when God says “Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated,” the meaning is not that God literally hates Esau but rather that Jacob was preferred over Esau. Esau received love but a love that was perhaps a bit less in intensity or scope. The word “hate” is probably an oratorical way to say, “Do not let your family or anything else come before God. Spiritually detach; let go and let love of God into your life. Don’t worry about your family—they will come along. In his ministry, I think Jesus also used provocative words not because it was necessarily the *best* word for the occasion, but because he wanted us to focus on what was at stake; on what discipleship entails. To follow Jesus, to walk with him, means to take a LOA from family. In a former congregation I served, I remember a visit I received from the distraught parents of one of our younger members, who was about to graduate from college. These parents wanted my help. They said their daughter had become a religious fanatic and wanted to go off to a third world country to teach people to read. “This isn’t something we taught her!” they exclaimed. Was this student hating her mother and father? No. She was choosing a loyalty higher than family and self.

His second prescription is to **renounce your possessions**. For some, this one may be even more difficult than the first: let go of the comforts and belongings that you might be tempted to love above all things—your palaces and portfolios, your cars and clothes and favorite chairs. This statement asks us to set priorities in our lives, starting with who or what is more important—our possessions or God. This one brings us back to the

discipline of simplicity, I think—something I preached on a few weeks ago. Jesus tells us to love God above all things; to put God first.

The third prescription is to **carry our cross** as Jesus carried his. So often we think of bearing our cross as carrying a burden that is put upon us. But I think there's much more to this. Jesus had in mind something far more broad-reaching—and far more radical. To be under the sign of the cross is to be under the sign of death. It's to live in such a way as to make clear that you have put to death the things of this world. Again, it's about seeing to your priorities and seeing which priorities are out of whack. To pick up the cross is to be willing to put Christ above all things.

I don't think Jesus is telling us to say "No" to our children or "No" to our lifestyle in order to say "Yes" to God. But we are called to look at our priorities. A man by the name of Millard Fuller did just that. From humble beginnings in Alabama, Millard Fuller rose to become a young, self made millionaire. His business expertise and entrepreneurial drive made him a millionaire at 29 years of age. But as the business prospered, his health and personal life suffered. He re-evaluated his values and direction. His search for a new focus led him and his family to Koinonia Farm, a Christian community located in Georgia, where people were looking for practical ways to apply Christ's teachings. While there, Millard Fuller pioneered and founded a low-cost housing program that eventually became known as Habitat for Humanity. He says, "I see life as both a gift and a responsibility. My responsibility is to use what God has given me to help his people in need."

Jesus, in offering these prescriptions, was—and is—asking, "Are you available? Can I count on you? Are you ready to do your part?" His words challenge us today. He still asks us if we're willing to set aside human relationships and favorite possessions to follow him. And if we are available, that leads to a second question: Are you sure? He turned to all those who followed him and asked: Are you sure that you're willing to walk my way? Do you know where I'm going? Did you count the cost, and are you willing to give up your old ways, your own life and possessions? Can you do that? He's saying consider what you're up against, or you'll be as stupid as the king who didn't calculate the strength of his enemy and who started a war he couldn't win.

To paraphrase the words contained in many marriage ceremonies: "This relationship should not be entered lightly or unadvisedly, but soberly and in the fear of God." Likewise, one does not enter into a relationship with Christ without mature self-examination.

We can't all do what Millard Fuller did. And God isn't calling us to drop our responsibilities to our families. But when we give up our life, Jesus returns it to us— with a difference. God breathes the gift of life into our beings and then sends us on our way to live lives worthy of the gift God has given us. On the face of it, it seems almost impossible to be Jesus' disciples following the three prescriptions in today's Gospel text. Maybe it is impossible if we are relying on our own abilities. It's not until we

acknowledge that “I can’t” on my own, that we are open to God’s “I can.” And then, by God’s grace, I can.

Today’s Gospel is timely as we begin another “new year.” In the year ahead and in every year God gives us, may the values of the heart be at the core of every moment we live and every choice we make. Thanks be to God.