



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 4 (A) – Proper 7

[RCL] Genesis 21:8-21; Ps 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

The Cost of Following Jesus

Today's gospel passage, from chapter ten of the Gospel of Matthew, has us in the middle portion of Jesus' ministry.

We've left behind the narratives of his early life; he has begun gathering his core disciples; and more people are joining his movement by the day. Which means it is time, Jesus seems to be thinking, to outline a little more clearly and a little more forcefully, just what it means to become his follower. The bottom-line message he tries to get across is that being his disciples is going to cost something—in fact, it's going to cost a lot.

Jesus begins this passage by making clear that if they align themselves with him, his disciples are likely to be maligned along with him by those in authority (who already have started their name calling). He tries to offer some reassurance: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, for God numbers even the hairs of your head and cares for you even more than he cares for the sparrows of the air.”

There are bound to be disruptions, maybe even ruptures, in their lives and relationships—even the closest ones, like among family members—if they choose to keep following him. This is the sense in which Jesus says that oft-quoted phrase: that he is bringing not peace, but a sword. It's important to remember that he's not being prescriptive—saying what *should* be done. It is abundantly clear, elsewhere in the gospels, that Jesus is a man of peace, not violence. Rather, he is being *descriptive*. He is describing what is going to happen as a result of his coming. Essentially, he is saying, “Look, if you are going to follow me, you need to understand something: this is not a part-time thing, it is not a convenient thing, it is not an easy thing. It is going to cost you something. It's going to cost something because it will lay claim to every part of your life—your relationships, your possessions, your very self.”

The most well-known modern-day treatise on the costs of discipleship is by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th-century German theologian and pastor who resisted the rise of the Nazis in his country, ultimately paying for those efforts with his life. He wrote a book called *The Cost of Discipleship*, in which he tries to define what is required of all who claim the name of Christian. It is a challenging book, but an important one. Bonhoeffer is repulsed by Christians who make the Christian faith cheaper and easier, rather than embracing the true cost and personal sacrifice—in the name of collective benefit—of following Jesus. And

he famously writes in that book, in a moment of heartbreaking foreshadowing, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

If you choose to follow Jesus, that commitment needs to reorient all your attachments to become your fundamental identity. Everything else answers to and builds on that. You don’t go ahead and sort out your life—what you like and what you care about and what you believe in—and then see how you might fit the Christian story into that. No, it needs to be the other way around: Your commitment to Jesus Christ—what he stood for and how he operated—needs to be primary. You build your life on that.

If we really commit to following Jesus, then some things about us are going to need to change. Some parts of how we live, what we think, what we are attached to, are going to have to die. This is what it means to “take up our cross” and follow Jesus. This is what it means when Jesus says, “those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

If our encounters with God in Jesus Christ do not alter the trajectory of our life, do not transform our understanding of ourselves and how the world is meant to operate, if we walk out of the doors of our church the same as we walked into them, then we’re doing it wrong. Being a disciple *costs* something. And it asks us to seek out and embrace being changed. That is what discipleship looks like.

Now having weighed these costs, it is fair to ask: Is it worth it? If following Jesus means bearing all manner of uncomfortable things, of changing, of dying, why would we want to do it? Why should we want to be Christian?

When you commit to following Jesus, you are not just trying to live like him; over time, you will become like him. And to become more like him is to become more like God—not in the sense of being all-powerful or all-knowing, but in the expansiveness with which you understand, appreciate, and interact with the world.

You begin to cherish everything, to radiate the peace and strength and love that comes from being in tune with the great heartbeat of the universe, even when it makes life more difficult. There is a feeling of freedom in this—of courage, of joy—that comes from attaching yourself to that ultimate reality. This, in turn, helps us face the strains and stresses and sufferings of life.

In following Jesus, our lives, our souls, our selves become more full, expansive, and wondrous. This opening up of our souls not only connects us more deeply with the One, Holy, and Living God, it also brings us into deeper connection with the created order and our fellow human beings. And this naturally brings forth from us more good things in us—compassion, mercy, and love.

When we choose to follow Jesus, it makes us more like Jesus, which in turn makes the world more like the one Jesus called us to create. Can we relinquish some of our self-serving control over our lives in order to bring about that expansiveness, that connectedness, that beauty?

This is essentially the conclusion Bonhoeffer reaches at the end of *The Cost of Discipleship*. After laying out the costs and challenges of discipleship, he knows he must explain what would make such sacrifice and strain worth it. He writes this:

If we surrender ourselves utterly to [Christ] we cannot help bearing his image ourselves...[we] become a reflection of him...That reflection of his glory will shine forth in us even in this life, even as we share his agony and bear his cross...Our life will then be a progress from knowledge to knowledge, from glory to glory, to an ever closer conformity to the image of the Son of God...[and through this] fellowship and communion with the incarnate Lord we [will] recover our true humanity, and retrieve our solidarity with the whole human race.

That is what it happens when we follow Jesus.

Does that sound worth it to you?

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