

Wrestling with the Gospel

Our Creator insists, read today from Deuteronomy. "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings, and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live"

Howard Thurman taught that a preacher is not obligated to preach a great sermon, however they are under obligation to wrestle with the scripture. He recommended we should offer silence to focus on the voice that matters most.....that God speaks loudest in silence. Thirdly, that preachers should resist binary thinking...he was committed to the search, wrestling for a common ground, a balance between the prophetic and the pastoral.

So, given the Gospel and OT readings for today I considered three options, ignore them and preach about the psalm, run away and hide, or wrestle. I chose the third.

First, let us listen again to today's Gospel....from several translations.

Gospel of Luke

"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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Sounds like an invitation to join a modern era cult.... let's listen to other Gospel translations...

Gospel of Thomas

"Whoever does not hate his father and his mother as I do cannot become a disciple to Me. And whoever does [not] love his father and his mother as I do cannot become a [disciple] to Me. For My mother [gave me falsehood], but [My] true [Mother] gave me life."

Gospel of Matthew

He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Common English Bible

“Whoever comes to me and doesn’t hate father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters—yes, even one’s own life—cannot be my disciple.

Message

One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one’s own self! —can’t be my disciple. Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple.

World English Bible

Now great multitudes were going with him. He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to me, and doesn’t disregard his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he can’t be my disciple. Whoever doesn’t bear his own cross, and come after me, can’t be my disciple.

Contemporary English Version

You cannot be my disciple, unless you love me more than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters. You cannot follow me unless you love me more than you love your own life.

You cannot be my disciple unless you carry your own cross and follow me.

silence

How can we both love others and choose life if we hate our own soul and hate life itself? John’s Gospel is clearer, followers of Jesus will be known by their love, not by their hate.

Following Jesus should not be a continuing effort of making the teachings less demanding. Jesus never suggested being a disciple would be easy; to the contrary, He did promise his followers that being a disciple would be worth their commitment. Their challenge is not to take the easy road, as the Sermon on the Mount instructs us, “the road is easy that leads to destruction”

Becoming a disciple establishes a new identity, focused neither on our original family of origin nor on our ego and self-identity.

We might ask, “For what would I give up my life?”

Jesus speaks of the “pearl of great price.” The parable presses the question: What is the most important thing in your life? What must you have, or what must you do, beyond all else in your life or career? Some people will sacrifice everything on the altars of money, status, beauty, fame, power, drugs, and so on. They work themselves to death, or starve themselves, drive away friends and family, destroy their bodies.

In these passages from Luke that we have heard over the past few weeks, Jesus is teaching, forming his disciples, and speaking to the crowds that are following him to Jerusalem.

Not all will become disciples; probably very few will. Few are interested in hating their parents, losing their lives, or taking up a cross. Few are interested, then or today in becoming disciples in the fullest sense to which Peter, Andrew, Mary, James and John, devoted themselves.

Discipleship has come to signify baptism, followed by church membership. To be sure, these are the first steps in discipleship. Disciples also are called to proclaim the Gospel, heal the sick, feed the poor, cast out the demons, and risk all for the Gospel.

Disciples are expected to take what they learn from Jesus and become teachers, prophets, pastors, gardeners, carpenters, painters, and participate fully in the life of the church; to continue to ask questions, to practice Gospel Based Discipleship,

Jesus invites us to come towards and to follow him. He teaches, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” To move toward and follow Jesus means to turn away from one’s previous life and to turn towards a new identity, defined not by worldly circumstances, birth, wealth, but by faith and trust. Disciples are defined not by who we were, but by what we shall become.

Taking up the cross is not a singular event but a lifestyle. Jesus told his disciples, at the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me”

The nature of discipleship is not limited to a one-time event, or even consistent Sunday worship. If one follows Jesus, then one is to dedicate oneself completely to that new path, to go through the narrow gate. Discipleship means total dedication to the Gospel.

The expression “to bear a cross” is not saying we should seek pain. Rather, that we must open our eyes to suffering. As privileged as some of us are, we must be aware that not all have what they require to live — food, shelter, medical care, healthy relationships. The first sign of carrying

that cross daily is to recognize the gap between what we have, and others are lacking, and take action.

In [The Cost of Discipleship](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer made a famous distinction between “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” Bonhoeffer was one few to stand up to Hitler in Nazi Germany; he was executed in a concentration camp in April. Bonhoeffer was essentially willing to “hate... even life itself,” that is, value his own life less than his faith in Christ, as Jesus commands here in Luke. I have two deep personal questions I would ask Bonhoeffer if possible; What was the ongoing source of his courage? What moved him from pacifism to the plan to assassinate Hitler?

We might ask ourselves, how important is our confession of faith? Our I believe or Credo statements?

Were we to be asked to deny our faith to preserve our life, or social position, would we?

Bonhoeffer’s understood Cheap grace as grace sold and delivered in the marketplace, like the Amazon delivery trucks we see daily. The sacraments, forgiveness of sin, consolations of religion are given at lowest prices.

Grace is represented as the Church’s inexhaustible treasury, from which she distributes blessings with bountiful hands, without discernment or limits. Grace without price; grace without cost!

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; It is the pearl of such a great value that the merchant sells everything to obtain it. We might understand it as the reign of heaven, for whose sake we will pluck out the eye which causes us to stumble; it is the intimate invitation from Jesus to follow, at which the disciple leaves family, home, and occupation to follow him.

Jesus teaches that the path we will follow as his disciples will not be an easy one. He asks repeatedly, “For what would you give up your life?” We might ask, are we ready to follow the Way of Jesus?

Costly grace is the Gospel which must be pursued again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which we must knock. God sets before us a choice of blessings or curses....and encourages us to chose life.

Thurman taught that the balance, or axis of preaching must be a balance between pastoral and prophetic.... a middle way, via media... I suggest that when Jesus directs us to love our enemies, to love one another as he loves us, and to hate our mothers and fathers, he challenges us to trust a deeper questioning practice, that wrestling with the Gospel will resolve.

Bonhoeffer wrestled and concluded, I can no longer condemn or hate my father, mother, brother or sister for whom I pray. AMEN.