

“Cotton Candy?”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Luke 14:25-33

I have a cotton candy problem. It’s supposed to make you feel better to say it out loud in front of other people, but you’re laughing at me. Of course, compared to most problems, this one is very small, at least on the surface. Still, a grown man, and a priest no less, whose discipline melts at the sight of cotton candy. But it started early. Every year, Adairville hosted the Strawberry Festival. Most of the kids blew their money on tickets to ride the Ferris wheel or the carousel, or played carnival games to win prizes, and we know how that usually turns out. But the object of my fascination was the magical machine sitting by the corner of the fire station, churning out gossamer threads of pure sugar. In our house, nobody asks, “**Who** ate my cotton candy?” They just come to me and ask, “**Why** did you eat **my** cotton candy?”

But there’s something worse. This problem, like so many, serves as a symbol of an issue hidden much deeper, far beneath the pink fluff, and while most of you may be free of the urge to devour cotton candy on sight, I suspect that more of us have this underlying problem than any of us would like to admit. It manifests on the surface in many ways: craving money, power, popularity; the desperate desire to be accepted, even if that means the sacrifice of our principles and integrity; the endless quest to feel secure from all danger, no matter what it takes from us. And all of those obsessions and compulsions arise from a single root. Most of us, maybe all of us to some extent, really like the taste and the buzz of cotton candy Christianity.

Take, for instance, worship. Some of us like to look down our nose at people who flock to places that offer what we derisively call “entertaining” worship, where the pounding drums send your pulse rate higher, and encouraging words set your heart on fire. But if the crowd that

comes here on Easter Day decided to pick a fight with the people who show up on Good Friday, that Good Friday crew would be smart to send out peace feelers, because they're outnumbered more than 3-to-1, worse off than the king in the parable, who only had to deal with a 2-to-1 disadvantage.

Now I'm not complaining or criticizing, because I have no right. I've got a cotton candy problem of both varieties, and it's perfectly understandable. How can the bitterness of dour penitence and gruesome death compete with the thrilling joy of resurrection? Of course, you do need a dead guy before you can find an empty tomb that means anything, but chomping down on the ears of a chocolate Easter bunny is far preferable to dealing with a crucified corpse for a few hours.

There's a host of problems with cotton candy Christianity. It is insubstantial. Just melts in your mouth, and before you know it all that sweetness is gone. The rush, the high, doesn't last long, and once it's over, guess what, gravity works. But most of all, Jesus won't stand for it, because he's a man on the move without the time to spin out a pink cloud of sugar for us, and if our faith diet mostly consists of cotton candy, we'll be too weak and lack the energy to follow consistently where Jesus leads.

He made that much plain enough when he turned to the large crowds following him and said some rather astonishing and disturbing things. You'd think he would've felt pretty good to look back and see the dust cloud kicked up by that many feet, people hanging on his every word, eagerly awaiting his next miracle. But that was the problem. Most of them were following Jesus for the goodies, and very few had a clue where this was going to wind up. They didn't want to know, and if there's anything human beings are really good at, it's finding ways to stay ignorant of what you don't want to know.

So Jesus laid it out for them without a single crystal of sugar-coating. You must hate your family. You must bear the cross. You must count the cost, and give up all your possessions. If these factors have not entered into your calculations, then that strong tower of faith you want to build is going to wind up as a patio, and when the tough times come, you'll make the wrong call and lose it all, like an outnumbered king unwilling to face the fact that he's already been beaten before the battle's begun.

That's stern stuff, and we recoil from it. I imagine after that short speech, the crowd following Jesus got a lot smaller in a very short span of time. Hate your family? You told us to love our enemies. Bear the cross? Count the cost? We thought grace was free, and if Dietrich Bonhoeffer had been there, he would have said, "Yes, grace is free, but it's not cheap." Surrender everything we own? What will we eat? Where will we sleep?

Jesus wasn't being mean or trying to turn people off. It was a reality check. Do you really want to do this? Are you prepared to accept the consequences? What are you ready to let go of to see this journey through to the very end? Those are hard but compassionate questions that need to be asked and answered by anyone who wants to be a faithful disciples of Jesus.

Does this mean that to be a good disciple I have to despise and abandon Stephanie and Ben and Emma? I don't think so, and neither do Alan Culpepper and Fred Craddock, two scholars who have forgotten more about the Bible than I'll ever know. Craddock writes, "To hate is a Semitic expression meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from." That's not the emotional rage we think of when we hear the word hate. Culpepper chimes in, "Hate indicates that if there is a conflict . . . the demands of Christian discipleship must take precedence," and Craddock adds that "the gospel not only takes precedence but, in fact, redefines the others." And what he means by "others" is all of other relationships.

Jesus is saying that to follow him our relationships must and will change, because following him will change us – our perspective, our priorities, our patterns of life. All of it gets transformed when our primary relationship is with Jesus, when no one else in our lives matters more to us than him. Being a faithful disciple needs to mean more to us than what we think of as being a good child or spouse or parent, and by being a faithful disciple, we become better children and spouses and parents, even though it might not feel like it when we make the sacrifice and say “No” to someone we love, because that’s the only way to say “Yes” to Jesus. It’s not easy, but very little in life that’s truly worthwhile ever is.

We need to take careful stock and discern if we actually own our possessions, or if we are possessed by them, demon-style. If you can’t let go of something you ostensibly own, then it’s got a solid grip on you, so who’s really the owner? Does that mean you have to give it all away? Not necessarily, but if Jesus were to ask that of one of us, what would we do?

Faith sees that what once seemed essential is disposable. Faith detaches from mere things with freedom and joy. But it’s more than just stuff that we need to be ready to let go of. Dropping an object and walking away is child’s play compared to what we really want, and that’s to keep a tight grip on our lives. We want to be in control. We want to possess god-like powers to obtain the outcomes we desire. That’s at the heart of all sin. The serpent in the Garden of Eden enticed Adam and Eve to eat the fruit because the serpent promised them it would make them like God.

And that’s what Jesus means when he speaks of hating “even life itself,” when he demands that disciples “carry the cross.” Now let’s be very, very clear here. Hating your life doesn’t involve self-loathing and shame. That’s spiritual poison. Instead, it’s about recognizing that our attempts to jerry-rig the outcomes we desire are mostly a waste of time and energy that

tend to lead to disappointment, frustration, and resentment. It's about waking up to the fact that when we think we've managed to take control of our lives, that's mostly an illusion, a little escapist fantasy world. What we can control is our choice to carry a cross or not, to be a disciple or not, and nothing shatters the illusion that we're in control better than the weight of a cross on our shoulders.

To carry the cross is an act of submission and obedience to Jesus. Under its weight, we are freed, released from captivity to our futile quest for control, released for a life of humble and selfless service. When we carry the cross of Jesus, we get a tiny glimpse of what he suffered for our sake, and gratitude wells up and pours forth from our hearts with the gifts of grace to share with others, like mercy, forgiveness and peace. And the more we share those gifts, the stronger we grow in our faith. And through what we suffer for the sake of the Gospel, we are made whole, healed, and reborn into a new life through the resurrection of Jesus.

That's what we've been given to offer the world: a cross, not cotton candy; a promise, not a problem. But we can't share what we won't accept, and we need to be honest about it, like Jesus was. When we're honest about the cost of discipleship, don't expect a hoard of people to break down the door, but pray for it. Don't expect perfection from yourself, but pray that we might be drawn closer to Christ's perfection. In fact, it's probably best not to expect anything, but to hope with faith that in our lives and in our world, God's will be done. Amen.

