

Jeremiah 18:1-11  
Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17  
Philemon 1-21  
Luke 14:25-33

This is not the sort of gospel passage that any clergyperson in their right mind volunteers to preach. This one is tough. This one has Jesus using harsh language and making almost impossible demands on those who are thinking they want to follow him. There's nothing gentle in this directive. Jesus is blunt. He is direct. And he isn't pulling any punches. Being a disciple of his is no easy gig, so think carefully before you answer the call. In the best of all possible worlds, preaching a sermon is about delivering a message about the Good News of Jesus Christ. I spent most of the week trying to find the good news in this passage. What I discovered was that Jesus drives a hard bargain. There's no wiggle room.

Jesus puts before us three criteria for being one of his disciples and he sternly warns that before we consider following him, we need to consider the cost. Don't sign on unless you're ready and willing to go the distance. As we have discovered so many times before, practicing Christianity is not an easy proposition. Following Jesus is no cakewalk. In our tradition, we baptize infants and their parents and godparents take the vows for them. When they are confirmed, they take on those baptismal vows for themselves. During the course of preparing for confirmation, it's important to be sure that young people know and understand what they're getting into. Counting the cost is an important part of answering the call to follow Jesus.

So Jesus says to them...the large crowds following him...and he says to us, the following:

#1 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

#2 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple

#3 None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions

Well, don't mince words, Jesus. Give it to us straight!!! He does...and he drives a hard bargain. As startling as this directive is, this is not the only place we hear these same words in one form or another. Jesus can be very stern and sometimes he can sound harsh. He's a realist. He wants us to be sure we understand what we're getting into when we choose to be one of his disciples.

What quickly becomes clear is that there is no room in his group of disciples for divided loyalties or for a casual and lukewarm attitude.

Don't you remember the gospel just three weeks ago [Luke 12:49-56]? Jesus told his followers that he did not come to bring peace but to bring division...Fathers against sons and mothers against daughters and mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, etc. And he was talking...not about his intention...but about the inevitable result of the message he was preaching. He was disrupting the social order. He was talking about new priorities and a new understanding of God. He was challenging traditions. There would be many who didn't like him or what he had to say. Indeed, many who would hate him. If you're going to be a disciple of Jesus, you're going to cause trouble. So when Jesus tells them...and us...that if we don't hate our family members we can't be disciples...he is reminding us not only of the cost of following him, but also the consequences of following him. He didn't leave us any wiggle room here. It's not customary for Jesus to use a word as negative and as strong as 'hate.' But his point seems to be that you can't have divided loyalties. If you have to make a choice...and many times we do...he's telling us that *he* must be the choice we make. We aren't always going to be able to have it both ways or avoid family tensions because of our allegiance to him.

Do you remember at the beginning of Jesus' ministry when he was preaching and healing near Nazareth? His family got wind of the things he was saying and the things he was doing and they were very worried about him. They thought he was out of his mind and plagued with a mental illness. They came looking for him...his mother and his brothers...so they could take him home and keep him under wraps and keep him safe. But Jesus had an answer for them recorded in Mark [3:31-35] "Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you. And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my and sister and mother." The gospel of Matthew records the same story in chapter 12[48-50]. Maybe that's why we have come to refer to the congregations in which we worship and learn as our church families. These people who are following Jesus with us are our mothers, our fathers, our brothers, and our sisters.

And it's not like we've never heard this before. In the gospel of Matthew [10:37-39] Jesus says to us: "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Which brings us to the second criteria that Jesus spells out this morning: “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” So what does it mean to ‘carry the cross’? Sometimes it means bearing our own pain and suffering with grace. Sometimes it means being able to withstand the animosity that comes our way because we preach or teach the good news of Jesus Christ or we share it with non-believers. And sometimes it means that we are willing to deny ourselves little luxuries or pleasures in the interest of serving others. We set aside our own needs to take care of someone else’s needs. Remember, too, that the cross is an instrument of torture and punishment. In the audience for whom this gospel was written originally were people who suffered persecution and torture because they bore not only tensions within their own families, but the burden of the consequences of civil disobedience that sometimes led to legal punishment. There are places in the world today where this is still the case. Christians are tortured and imprisoned for what they say and for what they do in the name of Jesus. All of these things constitute ‘carrying the cross’.

Jesus drives a hard bargain.

The third criteria is a directive to give up all our possessions. This is not the first time we’ve heard Jesus tell people that they must give up their possessions. In the gospel of Mark [10:20-22] we hear about the rich young man who wanted to know how he could get eternal life and Jesus answered him saying that he should keep the law and he answered: “Teacher, I have kept all these [commandments] since my youth.” Jesus looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions.” And many of us face the same dilemma.

And we hear the same thing again in Luke [12:33-34] “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Jesus wants our hearts and he wants our unflinching allegiance. He drives a hard bargain. Jesus wants us to come to him with no divided loyalties. The gospel of Matthew [6:24] tells us “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” And we hear the exact same verse in the gospel of Luke [16:13]. Jesus doesn’t want any divided loyalties. And Jesus drives a hard bargain. It’s not that wealth in and of itself is a bad thing. Many of Jesus’ followers and supporters were wealthy and provided resources to Jesus and his disciples. The problem comes when we love the wealth more than we love the Savior.

But all of us are listening to this and silently protesting. Right? We're thinking, "I'm not going to sell my house and disperse all my bank accounts! That's crazy! And I'm not going to do it! I've worked all my life for what I have. These are the resources that mean no one else will have to take care of me. This is being a responsible person. These are the resources that help me feel safe." And surely they do. We all know that we feel safer when we can take care of our own needs with our own resources.

The disciples actually felt much the same way. The gospel of Matthew [19:27-30] tells us about Peter's protest and Jesus' answer: "Then Peter said in reply, "Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?" Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or field, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first." And the gospel of Mark records exactly the same words from Jesus in Ch. 10:28-31.

Jesus drives a hard bargain. He doesn't mince words and he doesn't negotiate. And he wants to be sure that all of us know what the requirements are before we answer his call to be a disciple. He assures us that better things await us when we do. And we know that Jesus always keeps his promises. And when we do not see the way; when we do not feel that we can safely trust God, when we feel that we had better look out for ourselves, we must always remember that God provides mercy to us in our weakness and grace to empower us to do his will.

That's the Good News.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.