

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

Sometimes it's very hard to decipher the meaning of Jesus' words. On the surface, they seem to be pretty straightforward, but upon close examination they are often deep and complicated. So much of what Jesus asks of us goes against our human nature...a nature, we might add, that was given to us by God. This morning's gospel lessons is one of those messages from Jesus that leaves us scratching our heads...or shaking our heads, "No!"

As we think back on last week's gospel lesson, we remember that Jesus had spent the evening enjoying a very fancy meal with some very wealthy pharisees and their guests. Jesus' lesson at that time was to advise folks not to self-promote. "Don't sit in the most honored place just in case the host has invited someone more important than you and you will be asked to move to a lesser spot...which would be embarrassing." Jesus is not only aware of the importance of social standing in any community, but he's also keenly aware of a person's self-image and the need to guard and protect that.

As we contemplate Jesus' messages to his followers and to us, we need to remember that Jesus loves us. He loves us SO much that He gave up EVERYTHING...creature comforts of home and family, social standing, wealth, ambition, pride, popularity, physical comfort, and human life itself. None of those things mattered to Him. And what He tells his followers...and us...in this particular Gospel passage is that they shouldn't matter to us either...not if we want to follow Him. But they DO matter to us. For whatever reason, God made us that way and now Jesus is telling us that we must relinquish all those human markers of success and comfort if we want to follow Him.

Jesus goes on to say. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." That sounds pretty harsh. To most of us it sounds like a goal that we mortals could not possibly attain on our own. But then Jesus has already told us he has come to divide families...even generationally...and we know that 'division' isn't a goal of Jesus...it's simply the natural consequence of his presenting new ideas about God and interpretations of God to all the people he encounters...some of whom will see and hear the truth in his words and actions and some of whom will not. Division, then, is not the goal of Jesus' teachings...it is the unavoidable and natural consequence of Jesus presenting to all of us God's intentions in creation...and not our own interpretations of those intentions.

But all of this coming from Jesus sounds harsh and we are not accustomed to seeing Jesus as a harsh task master. He does, however, make it very clear that anyone who wants to be his disciple must choose....the choice must be between doing as Jesus asks in loving the poor, in shunning physical possessions, in refusing to accumulate wealth, in putting biological family on the back burner, and following Jesus wherever the path leads...including imprisonment, torture, and physical death. It's easy to understand why Jesus' standards are so hard to meet...why truly following in his footsteps is so daunting...and why his claims on his followers are so stringent that we are forced to take seriously and without hesitation his invitation to us to be one of his disciples. It's not a matter of just being a good person, or reading the Bible on a regular basis, or being a responsible citizen in society or even being an active member of a church and praying regularly. Jesus' standards are far higher than that. Jesus is saying to us in plain and specific language...if He doesn't come first in our lives...and that means turning our backs on everything that is important to us in this life...then we can't be His disciples. How many of us are truly prepared to do that? It's something I struggle with on a regular basis and I expect you do, too.

Jesus knows that becoming one of his disciples will be very costly to anyone who makes that decision. He advises us to count the cost...to think ahead...to wrestle with our decisions and our human longings. He chooses two parables to illustrate his point. The first is about the man who begins building a tower, but meets with disaster when he doesn't have enough material to complete the job. He didn't think ahead to see if he could finish the project with what he had and he fell into disgrace. The other parable is about a military commander who needs to determine whether or not he can be successful in a war with the soldiers and the armaments he has. If he doesn't make this calculation correctly, he may lose his entire army. It's better that he assess the situation and ask for terms of peace if he believes he cannot win with the soldiers he has.

Jesus has many attractive qualities that draw us to Him and He is the source of grace. This particular gospel passage speaks to what theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as "Cheap Grace." Bonhoeffer's definition is: "Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." Bonhoeffer was a Christian theologian during the Nazi regime in Germany. He was a Lutheran minister and a founder of the Confessing Church in Germany. He remained outspoken about Hitler and Nazism and was imprisoned in 1944. He was executed on April 9, 1945 just two weeks before the concentration camp in which he was imprisoned was liberated and a mere month before the end of World War II in Europe on May 8, 1945. Few modern-day Christians have paid such a high price for following Jesus with their whole being, but certainly the people standing before Jesus and

listening to him in first century Palestine knew precisely what the risks were for following him with their whole being. Bonhoeffer knew the risks as well.

We do not currently face such high risk in the world in which we live, but following Jesus wholeheartedly comes at a heavy price nevertheless. Jesus continues to speak to us about the price of discipleship. Jesus plainly tells us that we cannot become his disciples if we are unwilling to give up all our possessions. That's a sobering thought to consider no matter what our lifestyle or our living situation; our family life or our politics.

As always, Jesus led by example. He did, in fact, live the life he was asking his disciples to live. He had all his physical needs met by those who followed him and listened to him; believed in him and counted on him; who saw some aspect of God in him as he walked the earth to preach and teach. God made sure Jesus' earthly needs were met by those who had chosen to follow him. Jesus led by example. He showed us how he wanted us to live. He was never afraid to speak the truth even if he knew doing so would bring him grief and heartache. We overheard his anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed to God to spare Him. God's will was done to the benefit of all humanity.

Jesus gave His all for all of us and asks us to do likewise in preparation for the kingdom that is to come.