

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

I mentioned a couple weeks ago, how in wandering through Luke, you come across some comments of Jesus that are, at first glance, puzzling. Jesus tells us this morning that: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." For many people, the verses I just read a moment, are puzzling. Must we really hate our parents in order to be faithful Christians? Didn't God tell us in his commandments that we are to honor our father and mother? What about hating our own lives? Aren't our lives a gift from God? Aren't we supposed to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves?

Large crowds have been following Jesus. Imagine the scene, Jesus and his disciples are walking down a dusty road, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus in the front, trailed by the multitudes. Jesus looks around himself, he fixes his gaze on the people who are traveling with him, and he calls them to discipleship. Close your eyes now, and imagine that you are also in that crowd. You may not know it, but in fact, you are a part of that multitude. You're feeling pretty good about things, you've found the Messiah, he seems so very gracious, just a short time ago you heard him invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, to his great banquet. The invitation was extended, and the people have come. You're walking with him, and life seems good, enough food, enough clothing, you are doing well in your profession, feeling pretty comfortable right about now. And you hear Jesus speaking, you're surrounded by hundreds of people, maybe more, but you suddenly realize that it seems like Jesus is talking directly to you. He seems to be challenging you. As you consider what he is saying, you realize, that in fact, he is challenging you. In fact, Jesus' words this morning are what I call a "high challenge." His words disturb your complacent spirit, they jolt the comfortable you, right out of your comfort zone.

My friends, you heard Jesus' words, these words which inform us, just how our commitment comes, and what dedication will cost us. It seems to come as a shock, even though this isn't the first time that the Lord has spoken of the demands of discipleship, and as you think about Jesus' words, it seems like you've just heard. But what is Jesus saying? You realize that he made three demands: 1) family, 2) self, and 3) possessions.

Did you really just hear Jesus tell you to hate your family? Well, Jesus often says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear, you heard him say it when you heard Jesus tell the parable of the Sower. And you remember when you heard Jesus say that one who hears his words and puts them into practice is like a man building a house who digs deep his foundations, building on rock.

As you've pondered his words, you've realized that Jesus is often talking about hearing and doing the word of God, when one hears the sower, the seed produces good fruit.

But what you've heard is a contradiction to what you heard him say before. But wait! Maybe there's more here than meets the eye. Hate my mom and dad, brothers

and sisters, is there any way to soften what Jesus is saying? Is Jesus talking about priorities? Then you remember when a man came up to Jesus, and you heard Jesus say to him "Follow me." And the man replied: "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him in your hearing: "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." I wonder if he meant to let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, that those who follow him have work to do. And what else did Jesus say? Ah, now you remember, he said he came "to bring fire on the earth..." He said he came bringing division, five in one family, divided against each other, father against son, mother against daughter.

"Now I understand," you think to yourself, "Jesus wants me to love my parents, but he wants me to love him even more, and he's telling me that if I'm going to follow him, then he may call me to leave my family." What Jesus is saying, is that kingdom priorities and family priorities, are sometimes in conflict, and when there is conflict, the disciple follows Jesus.

That makes sense concerning my parents and my siblings, but what's this about hating myself, about carrying a cross? I'm to love my neighbor as myself, I'm to love my enemies and do good to them, but hate myself? But I remember hearing that Jesus said something about "Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." Could I lay down my life for someone else if I didn't love them? What Jesus said then makes sense, but I wonder if this is something he would do for me. I think he probably would. He said once before that anyone who wants to save his life will lose it, but that anyone who loses his life for Jesus' sake, will save it. And then he asked those of us around him that day, what good it would be for a person to gain the whole world, yet lose or forfeit his very self. You know, something is peculiar here... "I'm walking with Jesus, he's on his way to Jerusalem, and he said he must be killed there. He said he would be raised again on the third day. This just isn't making sense to me. He's the Messiah, isn't he? A Messiah who's on the way to Jerusalem, a Messiah who is on the way to his cross, and invites me, and those around me, to take up our cross as well."

And what about my possessions? Things are just starting to go really good. I don't want to renounce my possessions. But you know, I could probably do more than I'm doing now. I haven't been giving my fair share lately, I know I'm supposed to tithe, and I promise I'll get caught up. But it's not like I can make a difference by myself, because I remember Jesus said the poor would always be with us. Oh, but I'm just rationalizing to myself. Remember the song that Jesus' mother Mary sang before he was born: how the Mighty One has done great things, how he has lifted up the humble, and how he has filled the hungry with good things..." And Jesus himself said in the synagogue in his hometown that day as he read from the scroll of Isaiah, how "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor..." I know God doesn't need my help to do things for the poor, but it sure seems like he expects me to do my part anyway. I know the twelve who are always with Jesus left everything to follow him, and I was standing among them that day when he said "Blessed are the poor..." and "woe to you who are well fed now..."

When Jesus called to that tax collector Zacchaeus, he actually climbed down out of a tree, and he repented of all his misdeeds, promising to pay back even more than he

had dishonestly collected. And there was that rich young ruler, Jesus looked so sad when he watched the rich young ruler walk away after refusing to give up his riches. But does Jesus really want me to give up everything for his sake? I'm not one of the Twelve, but Jesus did call me, as he's called everyone who is here today, and more who aren't here today. But his call seems kind of radical, or is it? It's not like this is an initiation requirement, or some ordeal that I have to pass. But I think that all my securities, all the things in my comfort zone, my family ties and bonds, my personal dignity and life, all my possessions, just might be at risk if I continue to follow him. But I have to ask myself: "Do I hold God, do I hold Jesus in my heart, or is something else already there?" Jesus said, not too long ago, that "...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

You know, I've heard and seen Jesus speak many times now. I've watched how he lives, he really does practice all that he preaches. He's kind and gentle, he's loving and inviting. I want to be like him, but I just can't do it on my own. But you know, when I've heard him talk, when I've really listened to what he is saying, it feels like his Word is standing beside me, holding me up. It feels like his Word is inside of me, I think it's starting to transform me, because even when I'm puzzled over what he means, I can't get his Word out of my mind, it's like Jesus has planted a seed within me, maybe it started out like a mustard seed, but it's growing. I wrestle with it, and the more I wrestle with it, the more I think I understand with my heart. His Word is in me, it's in my heart. That Word that Jesus speaks has brought with it a power, a power to transform even me, into the kind of disciple Jesus wants me to be. I realize now that he's not telling me to hate anyone, but to love them as I love myself, but to love him even more because he gives me that love in the first place. I realize now that I don't have to hate myself, because he made me, he gave myself to me, and I think he's going to be giving himself to me when he gets to Jerusalem, he called us his friends, and I think he's going to die for us. God has given me my possessions, he gave me myself, and all that I have, and all he is asking is that I give a tenth of it back to him.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ! Now that you're back in our sanctuary after your walk with Jesus two thousand years ago, I want you to consider that you are still walking with him. You may be sitting here thinking that you're a Christian, and Lutheran, but that when you look through the lens of faith, you see that discipleship is costly, too costly. And the fact of the matter is, being Christian, being a disciple, is costly, very costly. It may cost you friends and family, it means giving up the headlong pursuit of money and possessions, putting the needs of others first, asking for forgiveness, loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you. Are you willing to pick up your cross? Are you able to give up your life to live? To live for Jesus? AMEN