

## **“Take Up Thy Cross”**

In January 2010 I realized that God was calling me into the ministry. I got in touch with my minister and we had several meetings to discuss the path I would take to become an ordained elder in the United Methodist church. He gave me several books to read. I was excited about the journey I was going to take, and as I talked with family and friends I received confirmation that this was the right decision.

But this path would involve sacrifice, both on my part and the part of my family. I would have to go to seminary full-time for at least three years, and I would have to shut down my law practice I had established and operated for 20 years. I would have to live away from my family most of the time because the nearest city that had a seminary was Atlanta (I eventually went to school in Washington, D.C.). Ellisa worked and was willing to let me follow my call.

What made this journey even more of a struggle was that both of my children would be attending college at the same time I was in seminary. Will started the University of South Carolina in fall 2010. Catherine would begin College of Charleston in fall 2012. I started my seminary studies in fall 2011 at Wesley Theological Seminary. I would miss being at home for Catherine’s senior year in high school.

In our scripture passage from Luke 14:25-33, Jesus sets out the conditions for discipleship. Jesus laments that many disciples will fail to meet the true conditions of discipleship. The focus of this scripture is on the journey. The three conditions of being a disciple are (1), renouncing family ties; (2), bearing one's cross and (3) forsaking one's possessions and the renunciation of all that one has. The way of discipleship is not easy.

When one reads v.26, it is unthinkable that one should have to hate his own family to be a disciple. One must look at the context of this statement. Jesus uses a Semitic hyperbole that exaggerates a contrast so that it can be seen more clearly. "Hate" does not mean anger or hostility. It indicates that if there is a conflict, one's response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over the most sacred of human relationships. There is no duty higher than the commitment to Jesus and to being his disciple.

The practical function to follow Jesus when he was on earth required a willingness to leave home and family and travel with minimal provisions from village to village to proclaim the Gospel. What Jesus will require you to do will depend on what he calls you to do in your life. In my situation, I had to leave my family for three years and give up my job. I still had means for tuition, food and shelter, but I had to live more frugally.

In v. 27 Jesus warns the crowd that no one can follow him unless they are ready to suffer the same fate as Jesus would suffer. This would involve bearing the cross to Golgotha and being killed on the cross. Those he preached to realized the terrible ordeal of bearing the cross and dying on the cross. Did they really think it would happen to Jesus? Did they really think it would happen to them? We cannot really know that they thought, but Jesus clearly makes the point that discipleship requires so much.

We must understand what cross bearing means today. The language of cross bearing has nothing to do with chronic illness, physical conditions, or trying family relationships. Some believe they are bearing a cross when they encounter such situations. As difficult as these situations may be, they are not conditions of discipleship. Cross bearing is what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires a deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus.

We have to be careful in America that we do not take discipleship too lightly. Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith has progressed steadily in recent years. As a result many see no tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of middle-class Americans. But we must remember that what Jesus requires can be contrary to our culture. He requires a complete change

of priorities, values and pursuits. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, we are new creations.

Have you ever committed to an organization or group without first finding out what is expected of you? Some churches, preachers and TV programs present the Gospel as though they were selling a used car. They make it sound as easy as possible. But Jesus requires a commitment from us. Although one cannot necessarily make a 100% guarantee to Jesus up front, Jesus is calling each person to consider in advance what the commitment as a disciple requires.

The commitment is a full-time commitment. This level of commitment is complete. No one should step forward as a disciple without being prepared to forsake everything for the sake of following Jesus. This is made clear by what Jesus says in v. 33, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Do we have to give up all our possessions? We might. We might have to give up the lives we have. In the early church, it was probably necessary for everyone to give up their possessions. It foreshadowed the need in the early church in Acts 2:44, 4:32 to share goods.

The true test is how much are you willing to give up to follow Jesus. Maybe you actually won't have to give up all your possessions, but you must have the

willingness to do what is needed to be a disciple. Will you change your allegiances, your priorities?

Jesus wants us to seriously consider what it means to be a disciple. He uses two parables. In the first, he points out that a prudent person would not begin a project until being sure it can be finished. One would not lay the foundation for a tower unless he was sure he could finish it. In the second, a king will not to war unless he has enough soldiers to resist the opposing force. Jesus wants us to consider the cost before we commit to being his disciple. God has entered a redemptive process he will complete. Christ has done what was required of him. Christ expects his disciples to finish their jobs.

The person I always think of when I consider discipleship is the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a young German theologian who stood up to Hitler and Nazi Germany. He was one of the first ones to speak up against Hitler. He found the Confessing Church movement in Germany. He had the opportunity to come to America and be safe, but chose to return to Germany and continue his fight against the Nazis.

Bonhoeffer eventually joined a group of conspirators who aim was to assassinate Adolph Hitler. This was quite amazing because Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, one who did not believe in killing. But he came to realize his discipleship

required him to give all. He was eventually arrested in 1943 and hung to death at a concentration camp in April 1945 only a few days before the camp was liberated by American troops.

Bonhoeffer's book, "The Cost of Discipleship" is a must read for one considering what it means to take up one's cross. There is much in the book. What is in the book is summed up by the following: "When Christ calls a man," says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "he bids him come and die." There are different kinds of dying, it is true; but the essence of discipleship is contained in those words.

Thank goodness my journey of discipleship did not require me to physically die. But it did require a full commitment on the part of me and my family. Ellisa was going to have to support three people in college. Realistically, this probably meant that we would have to incur student loan debt. But God provided. Our son Will received a full four year academic scholarship to USC. Catherine received scholarships which paid about half her tuition and board at College of Charleston. I ended up receiving about \$70,000 in grants and scholarships which paid most of my \$90,000 in costs. We did not have to borrow any money. God's journey for me has been very rewarding. Following Jesus involves sacrifice but also has many rewards.

The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some persons a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change of priorities is required of all who would be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed. Not partial commitments are accepted.