

Following Jesus is Hard Work

Luke 14:25-33 (NIV)

September 9, 2007

On Good Friday, 1985, Keith Wheeler began carrying a cross. It is made of wood and is twelve feet long with a little wheel attached to the bottom to help it roll along. So far, he has carried it through every continent including Antarctica, and 170 countries. He says he does it as a reminder of God's love for all people.

Arthur Blesset has found himself a place in the Guinness Book of Records as the person who has taken the longest walk in history. Beginning at Christmas in 1969, he has carried a wooden cross through 307 nations for a total of over 37,000 miles. He says he does it for the glory of God.

I guess that I can't argue with the faith or the motives of these two guys. Some might call them a couple of nut-cases. Some might think they are a few bricks short of a bell tower. To use a well-worn cliché: to each his own.

Regardless of what we think about such avenues of witness and such methods of evangelism, we still come back to the center of our Christian faith – the cross. At the very center of all of our doctrine, all of our theology, all of our witness, all of our service, and all of our proclamation, stands the cross.

One of the things about the contemporary church that has bothered me for quite some time is the feeling I get that the church is often engaged in a game of "bait and switch." We say things like:

- Come to the place that truly cares about you
- Come to the place where you are important
- Come to the place that is a safe haven from the cares of the world
- Come to the place where you can be fed
- Come to the place that meets your needs
- If you need help with your marriage – count on us
- If your teenagers are getting on your last nerve, we can help
- If your finances are out of line, we have a program to get it all sorted out
- If you have trouble making sense of the world, we have the resources to get you back on track
- If you need a 12 step program, we have one
- If you are looking for an aerobics class, or a softball team, or a bowling league, we've got them

Now on the surface, there is nothing wrong with that stuff, but I get the feeling that sometimes we get people to come into the church with the presentation of sort of a "church-lite." You don't have to do much, just show up and we will take care of you. Then once we get folks in the door, we say, "Oh yeah, there's this thing call the cross.

You see, the demands of the cross are real. They are difficult. They demand full-time commitment. This Christianity stuff is not for sissies. The lifestyle of the cross is more than just a one hour a week excursion. In my opinion, the demands are even greater than lugging a wooden cross around the world.

It's true that Jesus says, "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). That is such a wonderfully comforting passage and brings us peace all the way down to our bones. But that is not the only side of the gospel. There are indeed other sayings of Jesus that sound very harsh.

"If anyone come 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."

Back in chapter 8 of the gospel of Luke, Jesus redefined family. "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (8:21). Such a redefinition puts the will of God first before any other considerations. All relationships are re-prioritized with one's relationship with God becoming the absolute top priority.

In other places, we find similar examples. Jesus told a would-be follower that the proclamation of the Kingdom comes first, before the burial of his father. He immediately followed this up with the imperative that no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom (9:57-62). All of these sayings are indeed harsh and are intended to cause anyone who would be a follower of Jesus to stop and consider the real costs of such a decision.

With the cross, one can never say, "I've done that. Now it's someone else's turn." With the cross, one's term of office never runs out. You don't pick up your cross on good days and then take a few days off. You don't pick up your cross until it becomes too heavy, at which time you can trade it off for something lighter.

Don't misunderstand here. I'm not talking about Sunday School teachers who need to take a break. Of course, we understand that. I'm not talking about administrative leaders who need to take some time off to recharge. Of course, we understand that. A Sabbath is good and necessary for us all. What I am talking about is not individual church offices, but the life of discipleship that carries on no matter where one finds oneself. When you pick up your cross, you're in for the long haul.

What does it mean then, to pick up a cross? Let's understand the placement of this saying by Jesus in the larger narrative of the gospel. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem for the final time. He knows that he will enter that city and will not leave it alive. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" he says. In other words, the work of the Kingdom of God must come before one's personal security, before one's health, and even before one's life.

I consider myself very lucky to have lived for almost nine years among the Old Order Amish and Mennonite cultures of northern Indiana because they taught me so much. One of the things that I learned from my Anabaptist brothers and sisters is that there are things worse than death. In fact, I learned that those who are afraid of death are those who are not fully convinced of the resurrection.

But Jesus wants us to be sure that we are able to count the cost of the decision to become a disciple and carry a cross. Becoming a disciples requires giving everything else up. Carrying a cross is just that...subordinating everything to the needs of the Kingdom and the leading of Jesus. His example for this is the twelve Disciples who gave up everything to hit the road with Jesus.

Jesus could have been warm and cuddly here. He could have let us off easily. He could have offered us a fairly painless form of discipleship. But he didn't do that. He could have said something like this. "Look, just show up on Sunday morning a couple times a month. Make sure that you love your wife and love your kids. Keep your commitments to your boss and place of employment. Always be nice to the neighbors, even the ones whose dog leaves calling cards in your front yard. Jesus could have said that, but he didn't. Real discipleship is more than just showing up on Sunday. Real discipleship is to love Jesus more than one's family, more than one's possessions, and more than even one's life.

I know there are some out there who will use this as an excuse to ignore a crabby mother-in-law, but that is not what he was talking about. Of course, family values are high on the list of the Bible, but Jesus is asking us to consider them in comparison to our love of him.

Compare the amount of time we spend with our families with the amount of time we spend with Jesus. Compare the amount of money we spend on our families to the amount of money we spend on Jesus. Compare the effort we spend in assuring the comfort of our families with the effort we spend in trying to ease the discomfort of the poor and marginalized among us.

The tower-building parable hits us pretty close to home. Jesus asks us to consider the cost of any endeavor before we begin. Are we really ready? Add up all of the money you spend on tithing, on buying stuff at the rummage sale to help the church, on special offerings for our missionaries, on second mile giving to help fix the roof of the church, and on dozens of other church projects to which you give.

Now consider your unchurched neighbor who doesn't spend that sort of money on the church and so has a little more for a new bass boat. It really does cost something to be a disciple, doesn't it?

C.S. Lewis talked about the financial cost of being a disciple. He said, "I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the

same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charity expenditure excludes them.”

And finally, Jesus tells us that his life comes before ours. He won't play second fiddle to anyone. Remember the book of Revelation and the letter to the angel of the church at Laodicea. "...because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." In other words, the church that refuses to take its discipleship seriously and act like the regenerated body that it is, makes him sick. He wants to vomit

When Jesus talks about not being able to be a disciple without carrying a cross, he is not speaking in a spiritualized manner. He is on his way to Jerusalem to die. The cross for him meant a Roman government instrument of torture and execution. It costs people their very lives. It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said that when Jesus calls a person, he calls him or her to die.

Following Jesus is hard work. That may be a message that we don't like to hear or don't want to hear, but it is the message of the gospel. It takes due diligence. The moment we think we have it all down is the time we need to be extra careful because we tend to slack off a little bit. Remember that the people to whom Jesus was speaking were the ones who would shortly desert and deny him in Jerusalem.

The gospel consistently presses its readers to consider their level of discipleship. Jesus continually challenges his followers to follow him, at the cost of everything else. It is hard work. Are we up to the task?