

September 5, 2010

Scripture: Luke 14:25-33

Sermon: "Cost of Discipleship"

This Scripture has bugged me all week and I wondered where did this Jesus come from? This certainly is not the same Jesus that we met last week, well maybe. He did get kind of rude at the leader of the Pharisee's house, telling them how to behave around the table. But this definitely isn't the same Jesus that healed people, taught large crowds about God's love and God's grace, this isn't the same Jesus that tenderly called us home, like a shepherd calling to his flock. Or is it?

It does seem that as we get closer and closer to Jerusalem, the more and more defiant and the more and more blunt Jesus gets. Maybe it is because that Jesus knows that the closer we get to Jerusalem, the closer we will come to facing the reality of being a disciple, not just what we decide makes a good disciple of Jesus. The closer we come to Jerusalem, the more and more the blinders that we have put in, fall out and we don't like what is really there. The more and more real the Kingdom of God really is, the more and more we see Jesus for who is he, not who we have created him to be. Maybe all along Jesus has been this honest but we refused to listen. Maybe all along Jesus has been this straightforward but we have only listened to part of what he has been saying, choosing the parts we like and ignoring the rest. Maybe all along Jesus has been clear about what it means to be his disciple, but we didn't listen.

Maybe that's why one of the commentators said that the lectionary people chose to put this scripture on a notorious low attendance Sunday because if we as the church took a look at it on any other Sunday, people would start to re-think becoming disciples. We would start re-thinking accepting Jesus' call and following him. And then where would our churches be? Who would fill our pews? Our numbers are already low? Why would we as churches want to preach this message, that is too much, that is too real, that is too honest?

So you see why this Scripture has bugged me all week. many of the commentators have tried to soften Jesus' words by saying that this is the fine print of being a disciple. Fine Print. I'm not sure I like this image. The image brings to mind a picture of Jesus as a shady business man. The image brings to mind thoughts of an untrustworthy Jesus that I just can't reconcile to the Jesus that I know. When the commentators and we fall into the trap of thinking about this text as fine print, it is almost as if we are saying that Jesus asked us to sign a contract when we agree to be his followers. Almost as if we are saying that we need lawyers to review the contracts so that no party feels like they are being taken advantage of when they enter into this agreement. Almost as if we are saying that Jesus is trying to hide something when he asks us to be his disciples and to follow him. And I have to admit, that is not how I first felt when I first experienced God's love, first experienced God's grace, and first decided to become a believer.

So I invite to really take look at this text and hear the Good News once more, not as Fine Print, but as a statement that we can and will willingly claim as disciples of Christ. The first thing that we have to understand is that Jesus is talking to a large crowd. He is no longer in someone's home. He is no longer talking to a private group. He is surrounded by people who have heard stories about him and he is worried. He is worried because he realizes that the crowd only sees

what they want to see. He is worried because he realizes that the crowd sees him as someone who is going to fit their needs, who is going to do what they want him to do, who is going to be the Messiah that fits into their understanding of who the Messiah will be, who will color inside the lines, and stay in the box until they need him again. He is worried because he realizes that the crowd wants him to be their “Yes” man.

And Jesus says, “It doesn’t work that way. Being my disciple doesn’t work that way. Being my disciple is hard work because sometimes we will be called on to make some difficult decisions, decisions that may put us on opposite sides from our loved ones, from our families, from the powers that be. Being my disciple is not easy because sometimes, we will be called to not take the easy road.

He never promised that we would get rich, that we would be powerful, that we would be popular as his disciples. Jesus is reminding us that what he did promise was that we would be filled with God’s blessings of peace and hope, that we would always be surrounded by God’s love, that we would always know that God is in control.

In our Scripture, Jesus uses some harsh words almost as if he is trying to shake or wake up this crowd that is in a trance, blinded by their own visions of what the Messiah will be, blinded by their own goals, blinded by their own needs. Jesus is trying to break through, to get the people to understand that they need to consider the cost before they claim to be his disciples.

And he does this by using the word “hate”. Now as soon as we hear that word, we begin to squirm in our seats a little bit because this is not the Jesus we know. Why would Jesus ask us to hate our families? Why would Jesus ask us to hate our friends? Why would Jesus ask us to hate anything?

Well, for us to understand this, we must remember that this Scripture was written in a different time and has been translated into English. And sometimes, things get lost in translation. When Jesus says “hate”, he is using a figure of speech that would have been familiar to his crowd and even to Luke’s original audience which really is a means of expressing detachment or to turn away from.” As Fred Craddock says, “This is not the emotion-filled word we experience in the scream, “I hate you.” Were that the case, verse 26, alone would shatter all the calls to love, to understand, to forgive, to care for others, especially one’s own family, found throughout both Testaments. Hating one’s own life is not a call to self-loathing, to throw one’s body across the doorway and beg the world to trample on it as though it were a doormat...Rather, what Jesus is calling for is that those who follow him understand that loyalty to him can and will create tensions within the self and between oneself and those one loves; and in such a conflict of loyalties, he requires primary allegiance.”

In our Scripture today, Jesus isn’t giving the fine print to being a disciple but is trying to get all of his disciples, even us two thousand some odd years later, to open our eyes to what it really means to be a disciples and to consider the cost before we make any rash proclamations. I think Jesus cares that much about us that it is almost as if he is trying to warn us off from being his disciple because he knows it will not be easy. He knows what awaits him and yes, even his disciples when they enter Jerusalem. He knows that there will be choices that we will all face at some point in our lives when our commitment to Christ places us in conflict with others. He

knows that being a disciple can be difficult and can and will create tensions for his followers, even now.

Now, I will tell you that at this point while I was writing this sermon, I was thinking, “Heather, aren’t you being just a little too dramatic? It is not like we live in the same time as Luke’s original community where they had to worry about being persecuted for their faith. It’s not like we, here today, have to worry about being martyred for our testimonies. We live a country that claims religious freedom. I can freely wear a cross around my neck and come to church on Sunday without worrying if I am going to be arrested for being a disciple of Christ.

But even as I had these thoughts I realized that I had fallen into the trap of creating a Christianity that is easy, that doesn’t ask too much of me, that fits my needs. Very dangerous ground and not what Jesus intended when he asked us to seek God’s Kingdom first. I may not face religious persecution like Luke’s original community but even today, my faith, my claim as a Christian calls me to make decisions that will create tension for me. And it is as simple as our everyday technology-laptops, cell phones, DVRs. These items that we use every day have implications for our faith. Because to make these items, companies need a precious metal, coltan, “that is being mined in both the Republic of Congo as well as the Democratic Republic of Congo. The raw coltan is then processed to produce titanium, which is used in many products common in the United States, such as cell phones, computers, and DVD players. The people of these countries see very little of the profits made by these mining operations. Over 30,000 children, some as young as eight years old, have been kidnapped from their homes in order to work in the mines or trained as soldiers. Some estimates state that over 5.4 million people have died due to the negative effects of the mining operations. Children often die of preventable diseases, such as diarrhea and malaria.” Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo are the most mineral rich countries but are also among the poorest countries of the world because the people don’t see any profit from this rich mineral. All they experience is pain and poverty.

I have to admit I was naïve of this situation, happily using my cell phone and laptop, and every year, when my cell phone contract came up for renewal, excitedly getting a new phone until this past June at Quadrennial Assembly where I was introduced to women from the Congo who shared their stories. It was not until that moment that I fully realized that my actions, my purchases have consequences beyond my new cell phone or laptop. And I came face to face with how my faith, my discipleship puts me in tension with our modern day world. Because now I can no longer purchase a new cell phone without seeing these women’s faces or remembering their stories. Because now I must ignore society’s constant call to obtain a new gadget.

Because now my eyes have been opened and I see that what I do matters. What I do has consequences for my brothers and sisters around the world. What I purchase and how I live have consequences for my brothers and sisters around the world and that my faith is calling me to do more, be more. And it is not just modern day technology.

It is the clothes that we wear. It is the food that we buy. It is the power that heats our homes. It is the water that we drink. What we do matters. What we do has consequences for our brothers and sisters around the world.

And in our text this morning, Jesus is encouraging us to accept the call to be his disciple with eyes wide open. We can no longer live in a bubble. We can no longer practice a safe and easy faith. We can no longer claim to be the Body of Christ when our actions, our words, our purchases create brokenness in our world.

Being a disciple is not just a bumper sticker that we can put on our car. It is a way of life that will create tension and conflict when we truly live out the principles of the Kingdom of God. We cannot be true followers of Jesus and ignore what is really being asked of us when Jesus calls us to be his disciples.

In our text today, Jesus is trying to shake us up, wake us up from this comfortable, easy Christianity that we have created for our own needs and for our own comfort levels and to really consider what we are taking on when we proclaim to be disciples of Jesus. Because as disciples, we will be called upon to be a voice for the voiceless, Because as disciples, we will be called upon to speak out against the injustices we see. Because as disciples, we will be called upon to make some hard decisions that will affect our families, our jobs, our friends and may even have us going against the powers that be.

Jesus invites us to open our eyes. Because the Good News is that “what is demanded of the disciples, [and of us] is not a burden or a something we cannot do. It is an opportunity that in the network of many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the gospel not only take precedence but in fact will redefine the others.” As disciples of Jesus, the good News is that we will truly know how to love more openly, more unconditionally because we know that God first loved us. The Good News is that we will truly know how to accept each other regardless of labels and stereotypes, because that is how God first accepted us. The Good News is that we will truly know how to live as the Body of Christ because that is how God first showed us how to live as God’s own. The Good News is that we will have the courage to live out the principles of the Kingdom of God because that is how God first showed us how to be the peaceable Kingdom.

So I guess the question for all of us this morning as we sit and worship God, and come before him, as God’s disciples, have we truly considered the cost of discipleship? I cannot give you the answer to that question because to be honest, I am not sure that I have fully considered the cost of discipleship yet. What I do know and what I can tell you is that God has promised to be with us as we continue our journeys of faith. What I do know and what I can tell you is that God has promised to give us strength and courage to be disciples of Jesus because we can rest in the knowledge that God is holding us in the palm of God’s hand. What I do know and what I can tell you with confidence is that our answer to the question will guide us on our journeys of faith. So my prayer for us this morning is that we open our eyes to the real cost of discipleship and to trust that God is in control. May we always remember that the rewards of discipleship far outweigh the costs. Amen.