

“No Easy Walk”

Luke 14: 25-35

Well, if I thought last week’s message was going to be hard to preach, then I must have forgotten about this particular text in this series. If I’m being honest with you, this probably should have been the week I missed. (Cough, cough, I think I am feeling a relapse of the flu. Dick Murphy, you want to take over again?)

Okay, since I have no takers for the preaching of this sermon, let’s see where our journey to Jerusalem takes us today. For starters, when it comes to the choice of this text, I have no one to blame but myself. I was the one who intentionally picked this text from the Gospel of Luke. Sure there were others from Luke’s travel narrative that I could have picked but something about this text called to me, that captured my attention. Maybe it was because the very words of this text are so harsh. I mean, look at the first line. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Did the author of Luke really think that statement was going to be a good slogan for a marketing campaign in recruiting people to follow the Gospel

message? Sure, it may fit on a business card, but I'm not sure people are going to want to buy what Luke is selling.

Nothing about this text really inspires us to sign up to be Jesus' disciples, does it? It is harsh. It is brutal. It strips away our enthusiasm for the Kingdom of God. It leaves us with some pretty ugly realities about what it means to be Jesus' disciples. And my friends, that is exactly the point.

You see, since the beginning of Luke's Gospel, Jesus has been going to great lengths to prepare us for what lies ahead. Jesus has been trying to make us ready for what is to come once we have entered into the city of Jerusalem. Jesus has been saying over and over again, that this is no ordinary journey, that this journey will lead to his death. Yet the crowd, the disciples, even us as the readers are refusing to listen to him. Since the very beginning, we have ignored what Jesus has said about the purpose and goal of his ministry. Right there in Luke 4, Jesus stands up in his home congregation, reads from the scroll of Isaiah, and says, very clearly, "I have come to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, to restore eyesight to the blind. Jesus says very clearly that he has come to set the oppressed free and to announce the year of the Lord.

Yet, we have refused to listen to him. As readers, as his followers, as his disciples, time and time again, we have just gone along, blind to the realities facing

us in Jerusalem because after all, this is Jesus....you know, Jesus. We have seen him heal people. We have seen him turn five loaves and two fishes into a feast that fed the multitudes. He has told us of loving our neighbors as ourselves. He has told us some really important stuff about being in relationship with one another. This is the one who has come as God's Son proclaiming that the Kingdom of God has come for all of God's children. And yet we seem to forget or at least we pretend to forget, that in the midst of all the life giving wonder miracles he performed, in the midst of all the prophet words he has spoken, he also told us that in Jerusalem, he will die.

As I have reflected on this journey to Jerusalem which we are making, I can't help but notice that every time Jesus says something about dying, his disciples are over in the corner, figuring out ways for Jesus to work on his PR. They say things like, "Now, Jesus, when you address the crowds, just be yourself. Act natural. Keep smiling. Just keep talking about all that love and grace stuff. Don't bring up the negative. You don't want to distract people from the goal at hand. Just keep everything positive. And everything will be fine."

Except that Jesus has a different goal in mind. Jesus didn't come to overthrow the Roman Empire. He came to usher in the Kingdom of God, to show God's people that God is still at work in the world. Jesus came to set us free. A task that can only happen through the power of the cross and the empty tomb.

As people of faith, we like the good positive stuff Jesus tells us but we tend to ignore the fact that Jesus didn't just come to comfort. Jesus also came to afflict the comfortable. Let me say that again: It would be best if we as modern day disciples remember that Jesus didn't just come to comfort the afflicted. He also came to afflict the comfortable. And he does a pretty darn good job at it, when he says stuff like, "Blessed are the poor and woe to you that are comfortable. The poor will see their reward in heaven while the comfortable have had their rewards here on earth. Jesus does a pretty good job of pushing us out of our comfort zones when he tells us that he didn't come to make friends, Instead rather, he came to announce the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom that will turn our worlds upside down and bring the powerful and mighty down. Jesus tells us that to be his disciple, we must leave everything behind and follow him. We must turn away from our very lives themselves and carry the cross in order to follow him.

Really, we have no one to blame but ourselves when we forget what awaits us in Jerusalem, when we ignore the harsh realities of being a disciple in a world that is broken and in need of hearing the good news. Jesus did a pretty good job of warning us about the dangers, about reminding us time and time again of the costs associated with being his disciple. It was and always has been our choice to ignore him every single time he did so.

Here's why I say this: We cannot deny that Jesus said things like, "People will hate you because of my name. People will curse you and spit on you because of me. People will bring you to trial because me." But somehow, with our selective faith hearing, we have heard, "As my disciples, you will be blessed. You will prosper. You will be wealthy. You will have social gains and personal benefits. As my disciple, you will have power and might."

Let me tell you...It truly is a gift...this selective hearing of ours, this selective reading of the Gospels that we use to understand the teachings and preachings of Jesus. I can't tell you how many times I have heard ministers, I have heard people of faith say they know exactly what Jesus would do, what Jesus would say in a particular situation because conveniently, it is the same thing they would do. Conveniently, it is the same thing they would say. Somehow, we have morphed the Jesus of the Bible into a Jesus that looks a lot like us, that thinks a lot like us. Over the years, we have turned Jesus into a person who gives his approval to our safe and secure, no risks involved understanding of what it means to live out the Gospel message in our lives. And the sad fact, is that we are okay with that.

As people of faith, we have tamed the life changing, always surprising, risk-taking power of the Kingdom of God. We have created a meek and mild Jesus who is our buddy, who is our friend, and we wonder, we wonder why no one wants to join our churches today.

It is because we have made discipleship easy. We have made following Jesus too comfortable. We have turned our calling to be Jesus' disciples into something we can do in our spare time rather than it being a demanding yet rewarding way of life. Rather than our faith being a way to engage each other in love, we have mass produced it with cheap toxic materials, available on every street corner and we wonder why no one is buying what we are selling. We wonder why people aren't listening to us anymore when we speak as prophets, announcing that a change is coming.

Sure, we can blame the lack of interest on the changing culture. We can blame it on the fact that Sundays are no longer sacred anymore. We could probably even get away with blaming it on the fact that people have lots of options when it comes to churches to go to on a Sunday morning. But I'm going to let you in on a secret: The mega churches aren't growing. The large churches aren't growing. The small churches aren't growing.

Now, I could bore you with facts and figures or I could tell you a story as to why I know this to be true. A few weeks ago, I found myself in a hospital waiting room. And I started up a conversation with a young man, discovered that he served a mega church in Lexington so we started to share "war" stories.

Now let me say, this young man was everything I am not. He was a millennial. He was hip. He was cool. He knew all the right places to eat in Lexington. Where I was like, “I’m 40. I was probably cool in the 1990’s and most places I eat out at have a drive through and toys for children.

This young man was the demographic that all churches are trying to reach nowadays... millennial, married with a small baby.

So I asked him if his church was growing and this is where he got quiet. He said, “Well, I guess you could say that we are but we aren’t really making or creating new disciples. Most people who come to our church are church-hopping or have moved to Lexington. We haven’t figured out how to make discipleship connect with new folks yet.”

As I have thought back on this conversation with this young man, the words from this passage keep running through my mind. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” Maybe, just maybe it is time, as people of faith, face the fact that there is no magic formula to get people into our pews. But rather, realize that people are looking for something more... they are looking for something that will change their lives, that will open their hearts up to the power and majesty of our God, people are looking for something that will set them free.

Maybe it's time we admit that we have taken the hard words of Jesus, words that tell us, "if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple" and turned them into "We will make this discipleship thing really easy for you. There's no costs. There's no obligations. There's even a thirty day guarantee. If you don't feel more connected to God in thirty days or less, we will give your money back, guaranteed. Come on, follow Jesus. What do you have to lose?"

Again, this may fit on a business card but I'm not sure anyone going to buy it because after all, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "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. It is grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate". It is grace without Jesus announcing a change is going to come, without bringing the good news to the poor, without recovery of sight to the blind, without releasing the captives and definitely without announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God for all of God's children. It is becomes a cheap and easy way to be Jesus' disciple without the power and majesty of God really behind it.

I chose this particular picture on our cover today for a couple of different reasons. First, as we can plainly see, it is Martin Luther King being arrested. No

one can deny the sacrifices he made for the Civil Rights movement, even to the point of giving up his life. I chose this particular image because it seems to capture the very essence of the cost of discipleship itself.

But then I was reminded that a picture doesn't always give the complete story. In 1961, a group of students from Nashville made their way to Montgomery to finish the failed Freedom Rides through the South. They risked it all. They quit school. They left their families. They even wrote their last will and testaments before they made their way to Montgomery. They knew the dangers they were facing and still they made the journey. Once there, they bravely faced the threats, the physical violence, the hatred of the Klu Klux Klan, all because they believed in the importance of what they were doing, in the message of freedom they were bringing.

While in Montgomery, they also meet Civil Rights' icon, Dr. Martin Luther King. John Lewis, one of the Freedom Riders, tells of that particular meeting. He shared that meeting Dr. King give the students hope, it gave them the strength to continue the journey on through Mississippi and on into New Orleans. The students wanted Dr. King to join them on the ride, feeling that his presence would give credence to the Rides, that his very presence would bring awareness to the fight they were facing. But instead, Dr. King declined their invitation to ride the bus. He told the students that he couldn't leave because he was under probation.

John Lewis shares how this news devastated the students who would be continuing the ride. They had left everything just to complete this important journey, many of them facing probation 3 or 4 times over, yet this man, this icon, this presence would not count the cost to make the journey.

John Lewis shares how this was a turning moment for him as a young man. He came face to face with the imperfections and vulnerabilities of leadership. He realized that it was no easy walk announcing that a change was coming.

Which brings me back to this picture of Martin Luther King. I wonder if this moment of choice concerning the Freedom Rides was not a turning point for him as well. I wonder if in looking at those young hopeful faces, he began to understand the cost of the journey that he was on as a leader in the Civil Rights' Movement, that this journey towards FREEDOM would lead him into dangerous places, would require him to make difficult decisions, that this journey would not be an easy walk but it was a walk, a calling, a prophetic vision he was called to bring. And that for him to do so, he could not tame the life changing, always surprising, risk taking power of the Kingdom of God. And neither should we.

Amen.