

Costly Discipleship
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 21, 2021- PM Service
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Matthew 10:34-39

This is how Matthew 10 begins: “He [Jesus] called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.” They were ordinary people, fishermen and the like. They had never had “authority” over anything. Matthew had been a tax collector for the Romans so he had some authority, but now these unlikely prospects were given authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal sick people! They were about to set off on the biggest adventure of their lives. They were probably excited: “Yes, let’s go!”

But if they were a bit tipsy with excitement, Jesus has some sobering words for them. Like a general whose troops are about to go into battle, he warns them. He tells them not to expect that everyone will be happy to see and hear them. He says “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.” He tells them they can expect to be mistreated even by their own families. “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me...” Expect to be treated the same way people treat me, he says.

All that comes before the passage I read. If the disciples were honored and excited about their great adventure by the time he finished they may have felt like saying, well, thanks but no thanks. Jesus makes very clear that following him is not going to be a walk in the park but a walk with a cross.

I wonder sometimes how seriously we take the call to discipleship. I wonder whether we’re satisfied with a personal faith, just Jesus and me. I wonder sometimes if the circle of our love is too small and the concept of Christ’s kingdom is too narrow. I wonder what I would have done had I been one of those 12 disciples and I heard these startling words from Jesus.

In 1951 my brother was drafted into the army to fight in the Korean War. After his basic training in Georgia he came home for a brief furlough. After that he would board a ship to Korea. I remember the day he left. My mother was physically sick for a week after that. This was not long after the conclusion of the Second World War. She had seen too many gold stars in windows and she was worried sick that she would never see her first-born again. I’m happy to say that he did come home safely but nobody mistook that call to arms for a walk in the park. Nor should we do that with the call to follow Jesus. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war...”

Rev. John Buchanan, former pastor of the 4th Presbyterian Church in Chicago, tells about the Sunday he baptized a 2 year child. As he sprinkled water on the child’s forehead he read these words from the form for baptism: “You are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism, and you belong to Jesus Christ forever.” The little one responded, “Oh-oh.” Maybe it was a reaction to the water but Buchanan said, “It was an appropriate response, a stunning theological affirmation.” I wonder if after hearing Jesus’ sobering words any of the disciples said softly, “Oh-oh.” They would soon discover that being a disciple of Jesus was costly.

The late senator John Lewis knew that. Lewis was a devout Christian and a pastor. His dedication to justice put him at the front of 600 marchers on what came to known as “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, Alabama, March 7, 1965. He was beaten and suffered a concussion and that was only one instance out of many when Lewis was attacked or thrown in jail. When he was asked why he continued to expose himself to violence he traced his commitment to the gospel of God’s love, not for some people, not only for white people but for “the world” (John 3:16). His own family didn’t agree with what was doing. They thought he should just go along to get along under Jim Crow laws. “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth,” Jesus said. “I did not come to bring peace but a sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.”

Both John Lewis in this country and Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany understood what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer draws a distinction between what he calls “cheap grace” and “costly grace.” “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline...absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.” Perhaps the most famous Bonhoeffer quote is this: “When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.” That does not necessarily mean physical death, though in Bonhoeffer’s case it did and it almost did for John Lewis.

It did for a slave Isabel Wilkerson tells about in her book *Caste*. Two plantation owners were having dinner at the home of one of them and they were discussing their slaves and debating whether slaves had the capacity for genuine religious faith, being that they were not fully human. The visiting planter said he didn’t believe they did but the planter who was hosting the dinner begged to differ. He said, “I have a slave who I believe would rather die than deny his Savior“. The other man ridiculed that notion and challenged his friend to prove it. So the host summoned the slave and ordered him to deny his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The enslaved man affirmed his faith in Jesus and begged to be excused. But to prove his point his master kept telling him to deny Jesus and the man kept declaring his faith. So the host took out his whip and beat the slave while continuing to tell him to deny his Lord, the whip cord cutting the man to the bone. He died as a consequence of the beating. “Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” The plantation owner took up his whip; the slave took up his cross. Which one was worthy of Christ?

“What is your only comfort in life and in death” asks the Heidelberg Catechism. “My only comfort in life and in death is that I belong not to myself but to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” There is comfort in that lovely statement of faith but maybe we’ve focused on the comfort so much we’ve missed the other dimension of belonging. I belong not to myself but to Jesus. Oh-oh! I can’t march to the beat of my own drummer. My personal life is not mine to live as I please. My mind is not my own kingdom. I can’t harbor prejudice or hate in my heart. I can’t express my sexuality based simply on my desires. The Christians in Corinth were tempted to go along with the moral promiscuity of their culture. Paul wrote, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” If we belong to

God what we do with our bodies and our minds with our talents, with our freedom should conform not to our wills but to his will.

And make no mistake; doing God's will in this world is nothing less than revolutionary. "My kingdom is not of this world." That may not sound very radical but when you set your heart on doing God's will, on seeking his kingdom it may put you on a dangerous path. The preacher Tom Long puts it this way, "Jesus wasn't crucified for his views on the Sabbath or of the synagogue and temple, and it wasn't because he stirred up political revolution. He was killed because he did God's will, and that was truly revolutionary. Every deed he performed was an expression of God's will and that meant that the will of others was confronted. Everything he said was a pronouncement of God's reign, and that meant the toppling of lesser, though tightly held, kingdoms." And it put him in harm's way.

On April 3, 1968 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis, TN to support sanitation workers who had gone on strike to protest dismal working conditions. He spoke that night to a huge crowd in a large church. It was a long speech, almost 45 minutes. He spoke about injustice. He spoke about the non-violent movement for justice and equality. He told about his near-death experience when he had been stabbed by a mentally deranged woman at a book-signing event. If you read or listen to that speech you can sense that Dr. King realized that he was always in danger and he may well have had a premonition of what lay in store for him there in Memphis. At the end of his speech he talked about the threats he faced but he said, "Well I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will." "I just want to do God's will." That's a lot more dangerous than it sounds. It got Jesus killed. It got that slave killed. It got Bonhoeffer killed. It got Dr. King killed. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Well, that's not a very happy note on which to end a sermon is it? If belonging to Christ mean turning over the key to my life, if being his follower means laying down my life for him, if doing his will could put me in danger, why do it? It seems like a recipe for losers. But let me leave you with one more story, from Acts chapter 5. Peter and John were arrested for preaching and healing in Jesus' name. If it hadn't been for the advice of a Pharisee named Gamaliel they may have been put to death. They were beaten but finally released. Here's how Luke ends that chapter: "The Apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ." Do you think that for one moment Peter or John regretted taking up their cross and following Jesus? No, they understood on a deep level the paradoxical words of Jesus: "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Loving God, the grace you extend to us in Christ came at the expense of his life. It cost him everything; it cost us nothing. But it put a claim on us. We do not belong to ourselves; we've bought with a price. We are yours: your children, your disciples, your servants. Give us eyes to see where you are leading, ears to hear your call and courage to follow when doing so takes us far out of our comfort zones. Amen.

