

Disciples

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 14:25-33

Baseball season is in full swing. And the Tigers are at 28 - 30, two games below .500. Ugh. So, instead of that, let me tell you about my illustrious little league career, now more than fifty years ago. My cousin Johnny was a little league hero. But I never came close to that. Still, I remember the promise of opening day: a parade! a new uniform! the first game! But the parade was a joke. My “new” uniform was old and patched. And for me, the game was a disaster. For me anyway. My first at-bat was three pitches for three strikes. I was out. Not just out of the inning. Out of the game. Out of little league. Out of baseball. Because I quit. Right then and there, I quit.

I don't remember what the coach said to me. Maybe he said, “Don't quit.” Maybe he said, “Stay in the game!” Maybe he said, “It won't be easy, but it'll be worth it.” Maybe. Because that's what a good coach says. Unless you're really lousy. Hmm.

I don't think Jesus is a very good coach. Do you hear him in Luke 14? He doesn't encourage people to stick with it. He doesn't encourage people to keep on following him. Instead he discourages them. He tells them to think about quitting.

Sure, there is the parade. Big crowds all around. Heading to Jerusalem. On their way to the Passover festival. With Jesus the center of it all. But this is no party. And it's no pilgrimage. It's a death-march, a death-march toward a cross. Jesus, for sure, is going to die. And who knows about the people who are close to him? So he warns them. Over and over he says, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

Listen to what Jesus says. Anyone who comes to me and who doesn't hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life – that person cannot be my disciple! (v. 26). Now, Jesus isn't encouraging anyone to actually hate their loved ones. To be hostile to them. To reject them. No. He's just issuing a warning that the gospel turns things upside down. It's a warning that discipleship, a living relationship with Jesus, a warning that discipleship necessarily redefines every other relationship a person has. Even the relationship a person has with her own self.

Listen to what Jesus says. Whoever doesn't carry a personal cross and come along behind me – that person cannot be my disciple! (v. 27). By now we're kind of proud of the cross. We put it on church steeples. We wear it around our necks. Some of us even use it to punctuate our prayers. [Sign of the cross.] But in the first century, a cross is a symbol of shame. In Israel, a cross means you're cursed. In the Roman Empire, a cross is the ultimate insult. In both cases, a cross is a sign of complete rejection.

Carry your own cross. That's another warning to would-be disciples: “Prepare to be despised and rejected. Prepare to be cursed by your own people. Prepare to be stomped on by the powers.”

Listen to what Jesus says. If one of you wants to build a tower, don't you sit down first and figure out what it will cost, and if you have enough to finish it? . . . Or what king will go to war against another king, without sitting down first to figure out if ten thousand soldiers are enough when someone is coming against him with more than twenty thousand? (vv. 28,31). In other words, “Are you sure you have what it takes to do this? to follow me? I mean, do you have any idea what you'll be up against if you follow me?” So, another warning to would be disciples.

Listen to what Jesus says. Every one of you who doesn't forsake all of his own possessions can't be my disciple (v. 33). In other words, “You'll have no home to hide in. You'll have no room to rest in. You'll have no couch to collapse on. There will be no resting, there will be no stopping, until the journey ends.”

So anyway, I'm thinking Jesus is a lousy coach! All he does is discourage people. All he does is discourage us from following him. And no wonder really. Discipleship is not easy. It's costly. And the costs are so personal Most translations don't bring it out, but this is what Jesus says: Hate your own father and mother. Hate your own life. Carry your own cross. Forsake your own possessions.

It's all so personal and individual. In fact, there is no discipleship without an intensely personal decision. And there is no discipleship without personal discipline. And we're talking about a decision that takes everything we value, and a discipline that takes everything we value, and puts it all into last place, with Jesus

and the kingdom of God first. That's what it means to be disciples. That's what it takes to be in the game. Because the game is hard. And let's face it, sometimes the game is just too hard for us. Sometimes we can hardly see a reason to keep playing. Sometimes we're ready to forfeit the game. And sometimes . . . sometimes we're almost ready to leave the team, even to quit altogether.

For us, a key part of following Jesus is belonging to a church, to a local congregation, even to a denomination. But church membership is under a lot of pressure these days. More and more Christians are leaving the church while they still hold on to Jesus, or while they try to hold on to Jesus, for now. We see them leave the church and we secretly wonder if maybe they're right. We wonder if it's time for us to leave, too. Because maybe it's all over for the church we love.

Our denominational synod gets underway soon. It's going to be a severely divided assembly. Who knows what'll be left when the smoke clears? Suppose you're on the Titanic, and you can see the iceberg up ahead, and you can hear the officers fighting over who ought to be in charge, and you can hear the crew arguing over how to steer the ship. How long do you wait before you grab a lifeboat and make your own escape? Sometimes being part of a church is too painful. Sometimes being a disciple is too painful. You know your own struggles. You know your own disappointments. Maybe you blame yourself. Maybe you blame someone else. Maybe you blame the universe, because you don't dare blame God. But how hard does it have to get? When is it time to say, "Enough is enough!"?

I suppose we could abandon ship. I suppose, we could quit the game. (Pick your own image.) But it's not in us to do that. Not in most of us, thank God. Not that we're expecting everything to turn around in our own lives, or in our church politics. Not that we're expecting a miracle of some kind

No. What we're expecting deep down inside; what we're expecting at the deepest and truest level of our Christian identity, what we're expecting at rock bottom, where we're marked with the sign of our baptism, at rock bottom, where we belong to our faithful Savior no matter what happens, at rock bottom, where we live to glorify and enjoy God forever, what we're expecting at rock bottom, what we're looking for, is one more game. Just one more game.

Because that's another day to be disciples. Another day to be faithful. Another day to answer the call of Jesus, when he says to us, "Come on, follow me!" And that's what disciples do. That's what Jesus calls us to be. Disciples who get in the game and stay in the game. Disciples who stick with the team.

My illustrious little league career is not a model to follow. Not for me. Not for any of us. But there is a better way. "Hey, Jesus! . . . Jesus! Put me in, coach. I'm ready to play." ©Rev. Bob Arbogast