

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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The Jesus in today's gospel is not my favorite. When I first read the text, I thought I should have stayed on sabbatical one more week and given this to Pastor Tom. Nevertheless, Jesus' discussion of discipleship really struck a chord with me. It made the whole discipleship thing sound scary, intense, and it was off-putting.

Before we get too deep into *what* Jesus said, I want to make sure we're all on the same page. So, a disciple is a follower of Jesus. Discipleship is our response to God's action by better aligning our thoughts, words, and deeds with God's vision for the world.

Now, let's jump into the shocking content. In verse 26 Jesus said, "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 disciples." At first, I wondered if that sentence was translated correctly. After all, hate is such a strong word. I mean, what ever happened to the commandments to honor you father and mother? What about loving your neighbor? It made me wonder, what is going on with Jesus?

It turns out that Jesus wanted to shock us by using the word “hate.” He is not saying that we should commit acts of violence against our family or selves to become a disciple. Rather, as the Rev. Dr. Carolyn Sharp notes, Jesus used a literary technique to underscore that, as disciples, we should not allow something less valuable to displace something more valuable.¹ That is to say, that we should not let our tendency to focus on ourselves, our marriage, our children, or our family to be the primary focus. Rather, discipleship goes beyond the tribe or familial unit; discipleship goes beyond our nation or even our species. You see, discipleship is about what is good, right, just, and loving towards *all of creation*. And, I don’t know about you, but I probably needed to hear Jesus use the word “hate” or I might have glossed over his point.

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-luke-1425-33-5>

Using that word also prepared me to receive another strong statement, in verse 33, when Jesus said, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Jesus’s shock-and-awe technique stopped me from resisting in a way. It revealed the path before me. It exposed the choice – the choice to follow the way of Jesus OR to follow some other way. The choice to truthfully enact the gospel OR to domesticate the gospel. The choice between a domesticated gospel of power, privilege, and intentional omission, OR the true gospel of justice, love, and truth. The choice between a domesticated gospel of selfishness, aggression, and “tit for tat,” OR God’s gospel of radical generosity, forgiveness, and peacemaking. The choice between a domesticated gospel that worships a “family first” mentality, reveres individualism, and venerates the ego, OR the biblical gospel that acknowledges that “when all succeed, I succeed,” the true gospel that declares, “sell everything so we can share everything,” the living gospel that say “our diversity is a gift from God that makes us stronger.” In the end, it is the choice between THE gospel, that is God’s gospel, OR a domesticated gospel warped by something else.

Last month, I joined with over 1,000 Lutherans at our denomination’s churchwide assembly. Every three year, Lutherans from all over the United States and Caribbean gather to discern how the Holy Spirit is moving in the church. / Six years ago, our denomination repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. That is, to apologize for and name that we are beneficiaries from a 15th century Christian directive that sanctioned the “brutal Conquest and Colonization of non-Christians who were deemed ‘enemies of Christ’ in Africa and the Americas.”² This year, the ELCA made

² elca.org/Repudiation

a public confession to native peoples regarding the Doctrine of Discovery and committed to strengthening our efforts to work for justice and equity for Indigenous people. We committed to learn about the whitewashed history of what has been done to Indigenous people.³ And, we committed to action using land acknowledgements in our bulletins or at our services and gatherings. So too, the church encouraged congregations who are closing to consider either returning land or money to local tribes as a part of dissolving their congregation. (I'll put a link to some more information about all this in the e-newsletter this week if you want to learn more.)

I found the concept of returning land to be powerful. After all, many Indigenous peoples do not have a concept of land as a commodity in terms of individual ownership. Rather, they share a tradition of collective rights to lands and resources. It was the colonization of the Europeans that brought individual ownership and privatization. So, when the settlers “bought” the land from the native peoples, the Indigenous people believed they were giving rights to use the land. That is, to share it with them in a kind of mutual lease where they would both occupy it as a collective.⁴

So when I hear Jesus speak today about giving up all that we possess I cannot help but think of the tribes that gathered on this soil. The tribes that had no concept of

³https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Declaration_to_American_Indian_Alaska_Native.pdf?_ga=2.92178136.392671886.1662066917-2121173830.1657304669

⁴<https://americanindian.si.edu/nk360/manhattan/different-views-land/different-views-land.cshtml#:~:text=Native%20Americans%2C%20did%20not%20appreciate,rights%20to%20use%20the%20lands.>

individual possession; instead, they had a model like Jesus'. A belief that all things can, could, and perhaps, should be shared. A vision that there is enough for all.

And as I wrap it up here, I want to name something. In fact, if you heard nothing else, please listen to this: today's gospel reading doesn't feel very Lutheran. It feels like "decision theology" about what WE do. And, discipleship is our choice; it's our opportunity to respond to a God who adores you. But, here's the more important truth, our choice is neither the most significant nor the first. For our God has already chosen to love you—as in, you particularly and “you all” as everything in the cosmos. Our God's love, God's gift of salvation along with God's desire for justice and peace are given to you freely. The choice has been made, and your discipleship (or lack thereof) cannot increase or decrease that love. Rather, today's gospel is about a choice to respond. A response to the love freely given in baptism, a response to all that God has given to sustain you, to empower you, to shape you, and to walk with you in that choice. It's an opportunity to follow Christ's example, to be Christ's disciple, and to love, share, and live abundantly. So, throughout each day, you will need to choose to follow a domesticated gospel or God's gospel. Which will you choose? I pray that we might choose to embody the love our God has shown. Amen.

