

Cost of Following

Matthew 16:21-28

One of the challenges during this pandemic that seems to have made things worse in the United States is our culture of self-reliance and individualism. Sometimes, those are good things. We like to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, do things on our own without needing any help. Yet those same qualities have made it harder to work together, to move beyond individual actions to have a collective response. We talk about our rights and not our responsibilities.

Now, this is often the case, hearing about people putting themselves first. In a normal year, the news would be full of athletes holding out for more money, putting their interests ahead of what's best for the team. As the virtual conventions finish up and the campaign ads start to cover the airwaves, we will hear politicians making all sorts of promises about putting our needs first, but we'll also hear politicians pointing out how their opponents have put their interests ahead of representing the people they were elected to serve. But athletes and politicians aren't the only ones who have trouble putting others ahead of themselves. We all do.

Perhaps that's why the words of Jesus hit the disciples so hard in today's Gospel lesson. It comes right after last week's lesson, where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus commends Peter for his insight, pointing out that knowing who Jesus really is comes from God. But then Jesus keeps talking.

This is the first time Jesus tells his disciples clearly what is to come. This is the first time they hear that Jesus isn't going to lead a successful rebellion against Rome. Instead, Jesus is going to Jerusalem where he will suffer. He will be put on trial. He will be crucified. He will die.

And this is hard for the disciples to hear. They thought Jesus was a different kind of Messiah. They thought he was the kind of Messiah that would lead them to glory. They thought he would keep them safe. But now they have to wrestle with the cost of following Jesus.

The disciples already knew about the cost of following Jesus. Peter, Andrew, James and John had left their fishing boats and families behind. Matthew had given up his tax collecting booth. The others had left their

families and careers behind, as well. They had given up a lot to follow Jesus.

But now they were learning that the cost of following Jesus was even greater than they realized. Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah showed that his identity is rooted with that of Christ. If Jesus is a messiah who must suffer and die, then that might happen to Peter and the others, as well. If Jesus is going to sacrifice his life, you may have to do the same. But that's not all that Jesus predicts will happen. Jesus starts telling his disciples about his upcoming suffering and death, yes. But he doesn't stop there. Jesus predicts his resurrection as well. He predicts his victory over sin and death. The disciples don't understand it yet, but someday they will.

Jesus has to suffer. Jesus has to be rejected. And that means we will, also. We will suffer for following Jesus. We will be rejected for following Jesus. When our Lord called us to follow him, he called us to take up our cross. Discipleship is not easy. Not now. Not ever. It's tempting to believe that we are doing something wrong when it gets difficult. It often seems to us that the Christian life should be easy and, if it is not, that we're doing something wrong.

While we might not fear suffering the same cruelty as Jesus suffered on the cross—the fear the first apostles display here that would lead to them hiding behind locked doors after Good Friday—there is as much to be wary of in the twenty-first century as there was in the first century.

There is a cost to following Jesus. Sometimes, that cost is in what we give up, opportunities we pass by because we know that doing so wouldn't be right. Sometimes, that cost is what we take on, trying to fit in church or time for prayer or Bible study when our schedules are packed. But the cost for us is small compared to those in other parts of the world.

Several years ago, an issue of the *Lutheran Witness*, our denomination's monthly magazine, was all about Christian persecution throughout the world. It described persecution present in Kenya, Ethiopia, Russia, France, and elsewhere. It described how churches were destroyed during communist rule in East Germany and

Russia. It described how Christians in West Africa are shunned by their families when they refuse to participate in ancestor worship. It even described how the head of the Lutheran Church in Ethiopia, the same church body that Kebede works with, was killed by the communist regime in that country in 1979. The 20th century was the bloodiest in Christian history. In the mid-20th century, Christians were 20 percent of the Middle East's population. Today, the high estimate is 5 percent.

When talking about the cost of following Jesus, it's hard to avoid talking about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's death. A German Lutheran pastor, he had the chance at the eve of World War 2 to remain safe in the United States, teaching at a seminary in New York City. Instead, though, he returned to Germany, where he would lead the Confessing Church in opposition to the state church which had embraced Nazi ideals. He was arrested for his part in a plot to kill Hitler. In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, he wrote "[w]hen Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." A contemporary of Bonhoeffer, Hermann Sasse, said something similar: "To believe in the cross always means also to carry the cross. A yes to the cross of Christ is also a yes to my cross."

But the promise of Jesus is not just in an example to follow. It is in what he did that we try and fail to imitate. In his self-sacrifice, in his death in the cross, there is resurrection, new life.

Because of His death, we have new life. Jesus has called us to live as his people in faith. When Jesus spoke to his disciples, he encouraged them to take up their cross and follow him, in what would seem to be one of the least manipulative invitations ever given. Life in this world will not be easy. It will not be filled with the best that this world has to offer. But it will be filled with God's love.

When we teach about Jesus, when we follow Jesus, we shouldn't be surprised that we face opposition. But because of the opposition and persecution Jesus faced, because of the persecution that led to his death on the cross, we can face whatever the world throws our way. We know that we don't face persecution alone. We know it's the cost of following Jesus. It's a sign that the church exists. What we do know is that Jesus overcame death, and promises the crown of life to those who

remain faithful. Because of Jesus, we can remain faithful.

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