

CARRY THE CROSS

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Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

You come here to church on a long holiday weekend as summer is ending. You settle into your pew, and what do you hear? You hear Jesus saying things like, “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” and “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” It’s almost enough to make you get up and walk out, isn’t it?

It is a difficult passage, and the hyperbole and shock value of the words make us want to qualify the passage quickly, to talk about Jesus’ rhetorical devices and how pleased we are to be intelligent people who don’t take the Bible literally.

I think these things are true, but I think we must also recognize that something serious and dramatic is happening here. Jesus really wants us to sit up and take notice. A literal interpretation of the passage seems impossibly far from our current lives and our ideas about social and personal responsibilities. This impossible possibility, though, is a way of turning our typical vision of reality upside-down.

Jesus is inviting us to discipleship, to a radical transformation of our deepest selves that translates into how we live every day.

Making Jesus’ call to follow him the guide for all your thinking and acting and decision-making does have consequences. Sometimes, those consequences mean alienation from those we care about most. Sometimes, those consequences do mean renouncing earthly possessions.

I grew up near a community of Franciscan nuns, and would often go to the day camps they organized and, later, just to visit. When I was in college, I remember hearing about how one of the sisters planned to celebrate her birthday: by drinking half a can of beer and watching an episode of *Numb3rs*—what extravagance! But that kind of voluntary poverty and obedience is the fruit of discipleship in religious communities. Such communities are not so far from us. We have several communities of religious in the Episcopal Church, including the brothers at Holy Cross Monastery just a short trip up the Hudson.

These women and men, called to a unique ministry, have committed themselves to lives set apart. They have taken on new names. They have relinquished the possibility of future marriage and children, and they have usually accepted less freedom regarding when, how, and how often they communicate with family members. They have surrendered personal possessions and money. I don’t know about you, but these arrangements sound pretty unpleasant to me—and yet most of the religious I have met seem radiantly joyful in their vocations.

Not all of us are called to such a life—so go ahead and breathe a sigh of relief... But don't heave too deep a sigh, because we are not off the hook just yet.

While Jesus' words might not be a call for you to abandon your dearest relationships and donate all your possessions, they *are* a call to count the cost of following Jesus, and there *is* a cost. The cost is significant: following Jesus demands your whole life.

Once again, for some this is a literal demand. It's hard to talk about the cost of discipleship without making reference to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and his well-known book on the matter. Bonhoeffer doesn't mince words. He writes, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

And Bonhoeffer did. A native German and active protestor of the Nazi party, Bonhoeffer was part of a group plotting to overthrow Adolf Hitler, and was arrested and imprisoned in 1943. While in prison, he became implicated in an assassination plot on Hitler, and was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp. He was hanged on April 9, 1945, and the Episcopal Church offers resources to remember him as a Martyr on this date.

Bonhoeffer is not a perfect role model—he was either involved in an assassination attempt or used family connections to avoid military service—but his story is a profound one of being so transformed by a life in Christ that he was able to stand firm in his faith, even to death. A man who witnessed his execution said, "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer ... kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God" (Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, p. 927).

It is unlikely—though not entirely impossible—that any of us in this room will be called to martyrdom as disciples of Jesus. Nevertheless, these extremes help to paint a picture of the all-in mentality Jesus is looking for. Being a disciple requires all of you, body and soul. Carrying the cross is not a part-time call.

However, carrying one's cross is not a heap of misery and spiritual suffering. Rather, it is about the voluntary choices we make each and every day as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Carrying the cross and following Jesus means having our lives indelibly shaped by this commitment. For some this plays out in dramatic and visible ways—religious vows or even martyrdom. But for most of us, it means living out our commitment to following Jesus in our ordinary, everyday lives, in everything we do, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

It's rather appropriate, then, that this reading falls on Labor Day weekend, when we celebrate the contribution of our labor force. Carrying the cross happens out in the world of work, and we ought to celebrate that here where we gather. This service is just a sliver of the work you are doing for God.

Being a Christian isn't something that happens just on Sunday mornings in the confines of a beautiful building. Voters and volunteers, websites managers and temp workers, bus drivers and barbers, students and secretaries, parents and payroll officers—all of these people, when they offer their time, talent, and labor to God, are bearing their cross by allowing the whole of their lives to be shaped by their commitment to Jesus.

We are—each of us—members of the body of Christ serving as representatives of God. What you do at home and at work, at school and at places you volunteer—all of that matters to God and makes a difference in the world. The work of everyday life can be holy; daily efforts can be consecrated to God. We are God's partners in action to better the world God loves.

In the words of Teresa of Avila, "Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

It is with that knowledge and that grounding that we look at our lives and count the cost of following Jesus. "Cost" is what we must pay or give up to acquire or accomplish something. It requires effort and resources, it requires giving something up, but it entails receiving something in return.

What we must give up to follow Jesus are those things that are holding us back from living into our creative partnership with the ultimate creator. These costs are different for each of us, and the means of discovering them is careful self-reflection. Are all of our relationships healthy and affirmative of our relationship to God? Do we own our possessions, or do they own us? Are we buying mindfully or anxiously overspending? Has work become an obsession? Are we holding on to things we need to let go of?

Sometimes giving something up is a necessity to have a healthy soul. Sometimes sacrifices are necessary to live lives of faithful witness. The letting go can be painful, it can feel like a kind of death, but it can also lead to a freer, more abundant life.

Jesus' words can sound like a mandate, and carrying the cross can sound like a punishment, but in fact Jesus is inviting us to a life of greater freedom. When we live with Jesus at the center of our lives, we are free to become more fully ourselves, to make decisions in a way that is faithful, with less care to what people think and how it will affect our image. The more fully we surrender our lives to God, the more we are able live and act without fear.

Paul embodies this kind of surrender in his letter to Philemon. Even in prison, he is able to discern God's love in every circumstance. This is really something amazing. He finds, in all of his ills and misfortunes, a loving gift.

Paul calls Philemon to the same freedom. He asks Philemon to forgive and free a household slave who had misbehaved and fled, something that would have been incredibly

countercultural in Philemon's world, and he trusts his friend to quit worrying about respectability and act in favor of what is just and right.

Reading Philemon today can be an uncomfortable experience. We might prefer a letter in which Paul denounced the institution of slavery and demanded that Philemon ask forgiveness for keeping another child of God as property. Instead we have Paul sending a slave back to his master—a passage that has historically been used by some Christians and Christian sects to defend slavery.

Among other things, this might remind us that the Church, too, has been called to discipleship. The church's social teachings have changed over time, as we learn and grow and come to see the world differently. Sometimes trying to live the way of the cross and follow Jesus means giving up old interpretations and ideas, and walking in a way that might put us at odds with our fathers and mothers in the Church. This is not an easy road to travel, but again it is a road of ever-increasing freedom and joy.

Discipleship is not easy, nor is it instantaneous. It is a process of becoming who we are called to be, and it necessitates full commitment. Sometimes, following Jesus means making sacrifices, but these sacrifices lead us ever closer to the freedom, fearlessness, and abundant life God promises.

I hope you will carry that with you when you leave today, after we pray, “And now, Father, send us out to do the work you have given us to do, to love and serve you as faithful witnesses of Christ our Lord” and walk out of the doors and into the world. I hope that you will remember your place as a beloved child of God and co-creator with God, remember that your very life shines with the light of Christ.