

Kiss it Goodbye
Luke 14:24-33
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
September 5, 2010

Jesus has set his sights on Jerusalem. He has hit his stride. He has the disciples with him, either by his side, or trailing a ways back. He has completed his ministry in Galilee, and now must walk the hundred or so miles from his homeland to the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Who knew that on his way he would find himself with crowds of people clamoring to be around him. He just wanted to walk to Jerusalem for what he knew would be an uncomfortable if not fatal confrontation.

So when he discovered that there were more people around than he'd like, (He was after all a two or three of you type guy rather than a hordes of followers type guy,) he turned around and uttered these unbelievably distressing and scandalous words. Hate mom and dad, get rid of your possessions and pick your least favorite form of torture and death to cling to, and then you may pass the test to be my disciple, and you may continue to follow me.

What happened to “Jesus loves me this I know?” Or “he walks with me and he talks with me?” What happened to “Softly and Tenderly Jesus is calling?” This is not sweet Jesus, this is brutal Jesus. This is Jesus who scares me to death!

What could he possibly have been thinking? Was he having a bad day? Was he trying to thin out the crowd? He doesn't really mean that I have to HATE my mother and father does he? And leave behind all I hold dear? This is the guy who in the next chapter, *the next chapter*, tells the endearing parable of family life gone awry, yet of death and redemption in the story of the Prodigal Son.

What can this all be about. I want terribly to be Jesus' disciple, but I'm not certain about those demands.

Over the years, some commentators and preachers have tried mightily to make sense of these words of Jesus, translating away the brutality of the word *hate* for instance. They have said well hate doesn't carry the same connotation in Greek as it does in English. That would be a way out! But alas it is not true. Hate is hate as in Greek and in English. There is a slight difference, the word translated *hate* from the Greek does not mean as we might mean in English an emotion wherein I am consumed by my dislike of you so much that I just want to do you ill. But hate in Greek is just as nasty. To hate one's mother and father, would have meant that one would have done something that would have injured them in some way, that would have brought them shame. So, the prodigal son comes to mind again. He brought shame on the family. You might say in Greek terms, he hated his mother and father.

You cannot make these words of Jesus nice. You cannot explain them away with easy translations. They are right out there. They hit followers then as they hit followers now. Right in a place we don't want to be hit.

And the difficult sayings continued. Not only am I to hate my relatives, I am to take up my cross and follow him.

The cross you will remember was a particularly sick feature of the Roman occupation. A way the Romans maintained control of the local populace. People were crucified on crosses because it was a cheap, horrible, vivid and very public exhibition of who was in charge. Rome. Stay in line or risk the cross.

We are so used to the cross it doesn't seem as scandalous as it would have seemed to a first century Jew. We're used to them decorated and burnished and we wear them around our necks fashioned in precious metals. We forget that crosses were one of the most vicious and inhumane forms of capital punishment ever devised. When someone was crucified, the whole village and those around knew it because the Romans always chose a very public place for the suffering to occur. And yet Jesus says, "To be my disciples you must take up your cross and follow me." Why would I want to follow someone who wants me to die a grisly death? I am beginning to feel like I'm being asked to drink the tainted Kool-Aid. Is this really right?

Jesus continued by telling two mini-parables that ask how to count the cost of an endeavor, and concluded by telling his followers that in order to be his disciples that they must give up all their possessions.

Again, commentators have tried to make these words nice for us. Some have suggested that Jesus was not talking about actual stuff we have in our homes, or things we accumulate. They have suggested that really what he wants us to do is to examine our relationship with our stuff. That if our possessions become more important to us than our human relationships and our relationship with him, then we need to give them up.

Oh how I wish it were so. But again, we're not going to get off the hook that easily. This difficult passage of Scripture is what it appears to be. Difficult. We cannot get around it. Jesus' words confront us at our very core. We are to give up all that we hold dear to follow him. Kiss it all goodbye.

As a cradle Christian, a person baptized as an infant, confirmed in my teens, ordained a minister of word and sacrament in my 20s and an adult with grown children, I am still trying to do what Jesus asks of me. And you might say that I am a professional Christian. His way is hard, his expectations are high, and try as I might, I come up short every time. But I cannot and don't give up.

A text like this can clearly make one feel like a failure, especially those of us who live in relative luxury. But if we hear it right, this text challenges us forward, to move us ahead no matter where we find ourselves, just move ahead, move forward, advance toward God.

For each of us, the challenges and the journey will be different, but for all of us, it is a following in his steps, a bearing our cross that ultimately matters.

Bearing our cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, trying family relationships or self imposed grinding poverty. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ, to his message that love overcomes evil and hope overcomes death. We are invited to take up our cross – that is, have our life shaped by our commitment to the crucified messiah – anywhere, anytime, and doing just about anything. Bearing our cross means that we allow the whole of our lives to be shaped by our commitment to Christ' message. Whether we are preachers or professors, students or secretaries, farmers or website managers, mothers or fathers or retired or anything else we do when we offer our time and talent and labor. All that we do, we do in the name of Christ.

And that might be what is most difficult about this passage. The entirety of who we are and what we do must be shaped by our allegiance to Christ if we claim to be his followers. And that is hard.

Remember the movie, "A League of Their Own." It's a film about the women's baseball leagues during the Second World War. At one point the star of team, the catcher, played by Gina Davis, tells the drunken coach played by Tom Hanks that she's leaving the team. She has had a particularly difficult relationship with her sister who is also on the team. "It's just got too hard," she says. The coach in one of his offbeat but wise answers says, "It's the hard that makes it good." The same may be said of learning a musical instrument, studying the Scriptures, learning a new language, following Christ.

The Christian life is no easy endeavor. Being a Christian will cost you everything. You cannot be Christ's disciple and still cling to all your other stuff. Following Jesus Christ will require you to turn your priorities upside-down. A whole new world-view must be embraced, for the Christian disciple. Therefore, the Christian lives in such a way that all those important THINGS in his/her life are mere INCIDENTALS, going forward.

I hope you have noticed the little girl behind me. How determined she is to hold onto those dolls in her arms. I suspect that Jesus sees us in the same way. Until she is able to let go of those dolls, she cannot embrace anything else. Similarly until we are able to make Jesus what we cling to, we cannot embrace anyone else with full humanity. We need to kiss all that stuff goodbye, and embrace the one who brings life.