

“You have taken everything I believe and tossed it in a ditch and ground it under your foot.”

That is a direct quote from my mother. We were sitting in her living room probably about 13 years ago, and the topic came around to religion as it did all my life growing up. Only at this point I had just left the church I was raised in in order to test and pursue what I experienced as an unrelenting call from God to become a priest. And this was our first direct conversation about it.

And these were fighting words. The kind of words that no child, even one in her fourth decade, wants to hear from their mother. The kind of words that you avoid by not having the conversation at all. Ever. But here we were, without my even planning it.

I can only attribute what came next to the grace of God and not any skill of my own. I was so startled and thrown off, that I for once didn't shout, or debate or throw the whole mess back with rehearsed arguments. I heard myself say “Do you really believe that's true? “

You know me, I said. Do you really think I've abandoned everything I ever believed? I mean I'd become an Episcopalian for Christ's sake. Still Catholic, just not Roman.

The conversation went on, like peeling layers off an onion. And I just kept asking, Do you really think that's true? As she tried to explain to me why my call looked more like disobedience to her than discipleship. And finally at the core of the onion, was her own deep guilt at disobeying the church in order to marry my father, who was a Protestant, and who had backed out of becoming a Catholic before their wedding in the early 50s. They were married for nearly 40 loving and faith-filled years before he died, six years after he ultimately chose to be baptized in mom's church.

But at the root of that incredibly happy marriage was I think this deep fear that God in fact can disapprove of even the most wholesome and loving of relationships if they challenge the assumptions of the church. I think there must have been this fear that she would have to somehow account for her marriage before God. And now, here was a disobedient daughter that she'd have to answer for as well. And why not when we have phrases like the ones from Luke's gospel ringing in our ears:

“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.”

Hate is a strong word. And this is a difficult passage. It's not unlike the ultimatum we get from Deuteronomy as well: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live ...* I remember a student in the Education for Ministry class one year crying out in his frustration at the God of Israel that he could not sell this kind of God to anyone. And I would have to say this is not the most marketable moment for Brand Jesus, either.

However. There has never been a moment in the life of God and God's people where God didn't ask to be at the very center of everything. It's the foundation of the 10 commandments. It's at the heart of the covenant, forged over and over from Abraham to Jesus. You will have no God before me – and nothing – not family, nor career nor church doctrine – get to take precedent over that.

What are we to do with this word “hate” showing up right in the middle of a covenant with the God of love? Well, we’re to back off a bit and not take the English translation so literally as to believe that God is requiring us to hate anyone. But Jesus is asking us to place God front and center in all things. To choose life is to choose God in this way. And Jesus is making very clear as he walks to Jerusalem and to his death that following him there has a cost. Have you thought that completely through? he asks his followers and he asks us.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and World War II martyr, wrote the book on this. It’s called “The Cost of Discipleship.” He was writing at a time when his own Lutheran church, the national church in Germany, was bowing to the will of Hitler. He didn’t have the luxury of blaming the farthest edges of Christianity for blessing fascism. Mainstream Lutheranism – the church in which he was a theologian and pastor -- was not putting up much of a fight against Hitler in 1937 when Bonhoeffer wrote the book. Six years later, Bonhoeffer would be imprisoned by the Nazi regime until the government executed him in 1945.

So he knew what he was speaking of. We know what Bonhoeffer’s time was like, we know what Nazi Germany was like – what was done to Europe, to Jews, to Gays, to people with disabilities, to dissenters.

We know what our time is like as well.

There is a cost to being a disciple of Jesus, the Lord of love and justice. And I think that Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel that if you are not feeling the discomfort that comes with putting him between yourself and everything else, you might not be following closely enough.

Bonhoeffer in writing about this passage from Luke, said that this call from Jesus makes people into individuals. Because you have to make a personal, an individual choice if you’re going to truly follow Jesus, a personal reorientation in your relationship with Jesus and everything else. In that kind of choice there is not the option to uncritically reap the benefits of institutions that carry you at the expense of others. Our unearned salvation does not provide a free pass in which God’s love for everyone blesses everything they do, even the sins themselves. Bonhoeffer called that practice of Christendom, a reliance on “cheap grace” – which in the end does not from God at all.

“Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves... the preaching of forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confessions, absolution without personal confession,” Bonhoeffer wrote. “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

There is an echo of this in one of our Eucharistic prayers where we pray: Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. ...”

We are praying here to be delivered from the temptation for cheap grace.

Real grace, on the other hand, is less a wash of wellbeing than a jet stream that obliterates the gunk and reorients us to face Christ at all times. “It is costly because it condemns sin,” Bonhoeffer wrote to a church steeped in complicity with Hitler’s agenda. “And it is grace because it justifies the sinner.” Which means It makes the sinner holy, but it does not bless the sin.

I was always taught that God's grace is free, which is to say it's unearned. But just because it's unearned doesn't mean that it doesn't exact a cost. And that cost is the way we relate to the world we're in.

Bonhoeffer interpreted the passage from Luke that we have today as allowing Christ, and his love, to stand between us and everyone, as a Mediator. So Jesus is this conversation partner, this intermediary who makes it possible for us to relate with everything and everyone else. Hate doesn't really make it out the other side of that mediation, that relationship. Love does. However, that love is not always what people want from us.

This is where carrying the cross comes in, where the rejection of our love or calling might happen. This is the cost of discipleship. That's why Jesus says: *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

The words of love that we have from Jesus today are strong words for costly times. And we are in costly times – costly for our climate, for our democracy, for women, for LGBTQ people, for People of Color, for people in poverty or ill health. The list goes on and on. As the saying goes if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention.

And I've got to say, that I feel immensely weak and ineffective in the face of all of this, despite my outrage. Every day, as I drive to work, I pray to Jesus for two things: for his wisdom and for his grace. Because I can't do this on my own steam.

Neither could Dietrich Bonhoeffer. So he put his trust in costly grace and that brought to his ministry certain amount of peace and blessing in the worst of times, even in prison.

So I want to leave us with Bonhoeffer's own set of beatitudes, the blessings that accompany the grace.

*Happy are they who have reached the end of the road we seek to tread, who are astonished to discover the by no means self-evident truth that grace is costly just because it is the grace of God in Jesus Christ.*

*Happy are the simple followers of Jesus Christ who have been overcome by his grace, are able to sing the praises of the all-sufficient grace of Christ with humbleness of heart.*

*Happy are they who, knowing that grace, can live in the world without being of it, who by following Jesus Christ, are so assured of their heavenly citizenship that they are truly free to live their lives in this world.*

*Happy are they who know that discipleship simply means the life which springs from grace, and that grace simply means discipleship.*

*Happy are they who have become Christians in this sense of the word. For them the word of grace has proved a fount of mercy. (The Cost of Discipleship, 60)*

*Amen*