

The cost of Discipleship on Homecoming Sunday

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

Years ago, after I completed my master's degree in Catholic pastoral ministry from Ursuline College in Ohio, I was among some graduates who were called to return to be part of a discussion with new students about the program. As part of the conversation the director of the program invited us all to share our definitions of pastoral ministry. In our answers we listed all the various workings of the church and church people in our examples.

At the end, the director of the program gently chided us. Pastoral ministry is something very specific, he said. It is the art of helping people to reflect theologically upon their lives. What you have described, all the work that people do in the name of the church or because of their faith, is called discipleship.

Now I had been in that program for four years, learning all about professional parish-based ministry, its scriptural connections, its professional aspects, its canons and its standards. And I had never heard that definition of pastoral ministry and especially how it is a subset of discipleship until that day. And I felt a little foolish.

But I haven't forgotten it. Because religious institutions put a lot of stock in the words they use for their ordained and lay professionals, their volunteers, their formal offerings and their programs. But before all of this, under all of this, and above all of this is discipleship: which is not a professional or vocation but an identity. It is an identity that orients us to follow Christ and to love with his love.

And that's not something we can set down or take up like we can a ministry or a program.

I think that's important to remember as we gather today on Homecoming Sunday to bless our ministries and programs, and joyfully recognize all the efforts that we are engaged in as members of St. Peter's. Much of that activity took a break over the summer and will be starting up in earnest again in coming weeks – things like our Godly Play program, our Parish Forums, our youth ministry and lunch club and the Lift book group. Other efforts did not take a break – Sunday and Wednesday worship; maintaining the buildings; offering pastoral care; stocking the food cupboard. Oh we had a few vacations along the way. Charlese is taking hers this week after a long summer at the desk.

Still we have Homecoming because there are ebbs and flows to the work of a parish. Discipleship walks with us 24-7, and colors all we do. Today's Scriptures remind us of that fact in a rather harsh way, unfortunately. They sort of clash with the lightheartedness and celebration of Homecoming. They don't go that well with ribbons and cake.

"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."

Ouch Jesus.

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. Commentator E. Trey Clark suggests that the Hebrew word for hate was often used biblically to mean to "love less."¹ 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 part 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." In 1937 when he wrote the book mainstream Lutheranism – the church in which he was a theologian and pastor -- was not putting up much of a fight against Hitler. 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 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 shapes the relationships that we have with everything and everyone else. Hate doesn't really make it out the other side of that mediation, that relationship. Love does. Even when that love is not what people want from us.

¹ E Terry Clark, Working Preaching article, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-luke-1425-33-6>

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.

But I think it's also important to remember that the presence of Jesus' love in our lives as disciples makes the yoke easy and the burden light. There is a cost to discipleship, yes, but there is also a yield – in joy and an appreciation of one another's gifts and their company in these costly times. This was how the early church rolled with its love feasts, and full-immersion baptisms, its healings and roof shaking encounters with the Holy Spirit. It's how we at St Peter's roll as well. Because I've always been struck by how when two or more are gathered here at St. Peter's there is usually a bit of a party going on.

And that is what we will celebrate and bless today. As a follow up to this sermon, we have a little video that our parish administrator Charlese Freeman put together about the liturgical ministries that allow us to strengthen our discipleship through worship each week.

And at the of the liturgy, we'll lift up all the rest of the work we do around here in ministries and programs and ask God once again to strengthen and bless it all. We'll ask God to help us live out of that grace that makes us disciples in times that hold both great joy and great cost – as all times do.

Amen.