

Three weeks left of summer, school is back in session, the Mariners have just about worked themselves out of the play-offs (and if you are Cougar fan, well, I don't what there is to say). But you came to church anyway, on a three-day weekend, looking for an uplifting word or two. And what I have for you is that whoever comes to Jesus and does not hate their entire family and even life itself, cannot be his disciple. What's more, anyone who does not carry the cross and give up all their possessions cannot be a disciple.

Reminds me of Mother Teresa, who was made a saint earlier this morning. She once said to God, "If this is how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them." What Jesus seems to be demanding is enough to make people just say "no, thanks," and go buy Seahawks tickets. At least there, you get to be in a huge, noisy crowd with your own beer and an order of chicken and waffles all to yourself, instead of sitting in silence sharing a sip of wine out of a common cup and getting a morsel of bread torn from a single loaf.

But then, genuine discipleship is not for the faint of heart. Because at the heart of spiritual discipleship is transformation. And, for Christians, that transformation involves carrying the cross. But that's where things get interesting.

Just before our reading, Jesus has been at a wedding banquet where he challenged the host to think about his priorities. Then he told a parable to one of the guests: the parable of the Great Banquet. In that parable, the host had prepared food and made everything ready, but when he sent his servant out to round up the guests, everyone he had invited sent their regrets. Feeling rightly insulted, the host in the parable gathered people from the margins of society to fill his house with dinner guests.

That's part one of a three-part series. Part two is what we heard this morning that started with large crowds traveling with Jesus. Few of those people have any idea why they are heading to Jerusalem, and what's waiting there. So Jesus turns to them and tells them what it will mean for them to keep following him. Now, we didn't hear part three, but I think it is literally crucial and I promise I'll get to it at the end.

Part two is upsetting. It was back then too, but for different reasons. You see, the Roman Empire did not kill people on the cross as punishment for

capital offenses. They used crucifixion to break the will of conquered people and as graphic and extraordinarily cruel evidence of their willingness to maintain controlling power no matter what.

*That's* the reference that would have startled the first-century crowds following Jesus. To them, carrying a cross meant the agonizing first phase of a horrific and humiliating death. Ironically, talking about a cross would have been far more disturbing than his comments about hating members of the family and life itself; the very words that we find so unsettling.

First century Palestinians had a vastly different understanding of the word we translate as “hate.” To them, the expression meant something more like “turning away from” or “detaching from.” Jesus was *not* promoting emotional contempt for family or for life, but was pointing to a process of spiritual maturing that *still* opens people to new lives and pursuing new purposes. Today, we might use the word “differentiation” to talk about that process.

Differentiation begins by looking inward to explore who we are—to learn about our thoughts, attitudes and values. Some are beneficial and some are destructive. Some are critical and some are supportive. Regardless, most of us learned our early attitudes, ideas and behaviors from our families or clans. Sometimes we notice ourselves acting in ways a parent or elder did that we swore never to repeat: self-centeredness, victimized orientations toward life, over-controlling attitudes of superiority. We may also notice ourselves acting in ways that we have admired in a parent or an elder: generosity, patient hopeful orientations toward life, encouraging others. Once we encounter these different aspects of who we are, we can begin to choose those patterns that we want to continue and change some of the patterns that limit us.

In this way, we begin to develop our own values, ideals and beliefs rather than automatically accepting the beliefs that we grew up with or those of our culture. We have a little more freedom, a little more resilience, and we find new openings to move toward perspectives that go beyond what we used to think of ourselves. While those new perspectives may include our immediate families or clans, *their notions* no longer define *us*.

Differentiation inevitably causes anxiety. But with practice and God's help, it frees us to become more fully who God made us be. That's the transformation at the heart of spiritual disciple.

So hear Jesus saying this: “If you can’t differentiate yourself from your family, your background and your culture, in fact, if you can’t differentiate yourself from your perspective on life itself, you will not be able to follow me.” Following Christ is not a question of giving up family, friends and possessions in exchange for prosperity and eternal life, although I have certainly heard clumsy stewardship campaigns framed this way. Jesus has something far more radical in mind.

The more we learn about who we most deeply are, the more we also discover that we are not identified by what we own; that we *have* titles or our positions, but we are more than these. We see that we *have* relationships, life histories and bodies, but these are not all that we are. All of these aspects of our lives are included in a new identity that transcends them, which is this: We are children of God. And God has entrusted all of God’s children with a delightful array of gifts and quirks, abilities and weaknesses. We don’t give these *away*, we give them *up*...to God.

So hear Jesus saying: “If you cannot differentiate who you *are* from what you have been given, you will not be able to become my disciple.” Now I want to make clear that when Jesus says you cannot follow, he does not mean “I won’t allow it.” No, you will not *be able* to follow if you are attached to a limiting perspective on life. You will only be able to follow if you are beginning to see that what you truly and most deeply are is a child of God, a caretaker of God’s creation and a citizen of the kingdom of heaven.

Discipleship does not work out when it is just one more human effort. Discipleship bears fruit instead as a movement of the Holy Spirit working *through* humans. The crowds with Jesus are standing on a road that will end with Jesus taking up *his* cross where he will give his spirit back to God. Jesus gives two cautionary scenarios in which problems arise because someone didn’t count the cost before they started. People who tally the costs from *only a human perspective* see what they stand to *lose*, so they will most likely conclude that Jesus is asking too much.

But discipleship is a movement of the Holy Spirit working through humans. Not only has God calculated the cost, but God has already paid it. The result of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is that carrying the cross that is ours is not just a cost for us. Our cross has more to do with our awareness of what God has done and how we choose to respond. The cross that is *ours* to carry is to live lives that do not promote loss and fear and death, but that give

love and hope and life. The cross that is ours to carry is committing our life and all that we have been given to help God bring the Kingdom of Heaven to earth, here and now, and in God's own time. Ours is to live our lives not as something we own, but as something that God has given us as a gift meant to be shared with others.

The key, as I promised, is in the third act of this passage that we didn't hear. It reads: "Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the earth nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Do you wonder what this has to do with what Jesus has been talking about?

Well, first, the word "earth" in this passage refers to a communal, outdoor oven used for baking bread in first century Palestine. "Earthen ovens" sat inside a walled courtyard where people mixed fresh donkey, camel and cow dung with chaff and salt to make patties for fuel. The salt helped the fuel dry faster in the sun and also made the dung burn hotter. That's when salt is fit for the manure pile.

People also put salt plates in the bottom of the ovens to catalyze the fire. Over time, the salt in the oven would wear out and become salt that is no longer fit for the earth.

You see, Jesus is using salt as a metaphor pointing to *essence*—the essence of *our own* spiritual discipleship—the heart and purpose of something natural created with the amazing ability to participate in the creation of life-sustaining fire and bread. To carry our cross as disciples is to manifest our essence as children of God who have been mixed into the sometimes aromatic circumstances where we find ourselves. To carry our cross is to share the essence of what God made us to be and to use what God has given us to facilitate the life-giving fire of the Holy Spirit through what we say and do.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen.

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Works consulted:

Firestone, Robert, Lisa A. Firestone, and Joyce Catlett. *The Self Under Siege: Voice Therapy and Differentiation*. New York: Routledge, 2012.