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Lessons in Luke: The Cost of Discipleship

Luke 14:25-35

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When I was about 8 years old, I saw an advertisement in a magazine for the Columbia House Record Club. The ad said that I could order 13 albums for just one dollar. Holy Cow! What a deal. They even had the Partridge Family's Greatest Hits. What's not to like? So, without telling my parents, I placed my order. And sure enough, in just a few weeks my new albums arrived. I was in heaven.

However, I didn't read the fine print. Heck, I could barely read at all at that age. I missed the part that said that I was now obligated to buy a dozen albums in the next year or two at full price. In fact, unless I told them otherwise, they would simply send me the album of the month and bill me. And much to my chagrin, they did! I suddenly had albums I didn't want that cost money I didn't have.

Some of us were "sold" the Gospel in a similar way. We were told that if we just pray a certain prayer and ask Jesus into our hearts we'll get a free pass into heaven. What a deal. What's not to like? While God's love and forgiveness are indeed free gifts of God's grace, being a disciple, being a follower of Jesus, is costly. And that's what Jesus talks about in today's scripture reading as we continue our journey through the Gospel of Luke. Let's read together from Luke 14:25-35:

A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, "If you want to be my disciple, you must, by comparison, hate everyone else—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.

"But don't begin until you count the cost. For who would begin construction of a building without first calculating the cost to see if there is enough money to finish it? Otherwise, you might complete only the foundation before running out of money, and then everyone would laugh at you. They would say, 'There's

the person who started that building and couldn't afford to finish it!'

"Or what king would go to war against another king without first sitting down with his counselors to discuss whether his army of 10,000 could defeat the 20,000 soldiers marching against him? And if he can't, he will send a delegation to discuss terms of peace while the enemy is still far away. So you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.

"Salt is good for seasoning. But if it loses its flavor, how do you make it salty again? Flavorless salt is good neither for the soil nor for the manure pile. It is thrown away. Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand!"

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God!

So...if you don't hate your family and fail to live in abject poverty, you're gonna burn in hell for eternity. That's today's good news. Clear enough, right? Well, maybe not! Let me share a few things that might bring greater clarity to these challenging words from Jesus to discern what they really mean.

You may have noticed that at the beginning of today's reading, Luke tells us that large crowds were following Jesus. Jesus had become enormously popular, and it's easy to understand why. He did amazing things like heal people. He taught with profound wisdom. He was a champion for the common people and he stuck it to the religious leaders. And by this time people had no doubt begun to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah, the One sent from God to overthrow the occupying Romans. In other words, people were following Jesus for what they could get out of him. They were treating Jesus like I was treating the Columbia House Record Club! Little investment; big rewards. But Jesus wanted them to understand that there is a cost to following him. Not so that they...or we...can get into heaven or earn God's love, but so that we can experience the fullness of life that Jesus promises.

I want to say that again. Jesus is not telling us what we have to do to be loved, or forgiven, or to be assured of life with God beyond this life. Jesus is saying that if you want to experience the fullness of life that he promises, it will cost you.

Now, I could spend lots of time untangling Jesus' troubling words about hating one's parents and

embracing abject poverty. But, instead of doing that, let me just acknowledge that Jesus, like many rabbis and wisdom teachers throughout the ages, often spoke in provocative ways that were never meant to be taken literally. Instead, they were meant to engage people in deeper thought and conversation. The more I've reflected on Jesus' words and talked about them with others on the faith journey, the more I'm convinced that Jesus is describing this core spiritual principle: on the journey of becoming all that God is calling us to be, there are some things we need to let go of. Let me say that again: on the journey of becoming all that God is calling us to be, there are some things we need to let go of.

This is as true in nature as it is in human nature. A bud must let go of its shape in order to blossom. A snake must shed its skin in order to grow. A tadpole must allow itself to be transformed into a frog, and a caterpillar must do the same in order to become a butterfly. To use the language of our faith, all growth is a process of dying to what was in order to rise into what will be. This is the lifelong journey of becoming.

When Jesus talks about hating family he obviously doesn't mean that we despise our parents. We're commanded to honor our father and our mother. Instead, I think Jesus is describing the necessity of leaving home, literally, figuratively, or both in order to become, to mature and to grow. It's no coincidence that in every epic tale the hero leaves behind what they know in order to become who they truly are. Abram and Sarai leave all that is familiar to go where God calls them. Odysseus leaves home only to return a hero. So does Frodo. So does Harry Potter. And so must we if we are going to live into our calling, growing into the people God is calling us to be. We don't need to hate our parents to do that, but we do need to leave home, to leave behind what was once familiar and comforting in order to grow, to become.

I've often thought that if a baby in the womb had a choice, it would choose not to be born. The womb is warm and secure. And while the birthing process is no picnic for mom, I don't imagine it's a delight for the infant either...being squeezed out of your comfort zone with muscle contractions, like toothpaste out of the tube. And then dropped into this cold, loud, blinding world. Who would choose such a thing? And yet being birthed, as traumatic as it is, is necessary if we are going to become all that God created us to be. Friends, I have a sneaking suspicion that the process of dying is very much the same way. It may not be a path

we would choose, but it is the only road to becoming what's next.

And this same process happens over and over again as we grow and become and evolve as people and as followers of Jesus. We leave behind what we've known in order to become what God is calling us to be. This has certainly been true in my journey of faith. I once believed that every word in the Bible came from God's own hand. I once believed that faith was all about getting into heaven. I once believed that being gay was wrong. I once believed that people without faith are going to hell. I once believed that God was out there somewhere. At one point in my life I was certain about these things. But not anymore. I left them behind because I sensed God calling me to something else. Letting go of those certainties wasn't easy at the time. For a season I lived in ambiguity. That is the cost of following Jesus. He leads us out of what is familiar, leaving what was in order to become the people that God is calling us to be. And sometimes that process feels like dying and rising again.

I have a friend who was brought up in a really dysfunctional family. He became a Christ-follower in college and began to see that some of his behavior actually contributed to the family dysfunction. That realization, along with the encouragement of his small group, led him to seek out a counselor to learn how to behave in healthier ways. And as he began to act in healthier ways, he met with a ton of resistance from his family, because he was upsetting the family dynamic. He realized that he had a choice. He could revert back to his old behavior and keep his family happy and unhealthy, or he could continue to behave in healthier ways and weather the family storm. As he prayed about it, he said that the Holy Spirit not only led him on the pathway of greater health, and also strengthened him on those days when the family drama was hardest. Letting go of his old behavior and of his family's approval felt a bit like dying. But in time it led to a kind of resurrection...not just for him, but ultimately for his extended family.

Maybe you grew up believing that faith was a one-time decision and secured your home in heaven, and the rest of life is merely a season of waiting for that day. Nothing could be further from the truth. Faith is a journey of growing, evolving, becoming... and it never ends even, I hope, when this life ends. The Spirit of God is at work in your life right now, calling you forward as you grow as a follower of Jesus. And that same Holy Spirit, who dwells within you, will help you

to discern what it is that you're being called to let go of.

So, let me ask you: What might you need to leave behind in order to become the person that God is calling you to be? Perhaps it's a belief that no longer rings true. A relationship that's holding you back. The expectations of others that are keeping you stuck. A comfort zone that you realize is merely a womb from which you're being called to a whole new birth. These are not small things. But that's the cost of following Jesus.

Thirteen albums for a buck was a pretty good deal, though my dad didn't think so when he had to pay for the next 12 albums at full price. Leaving behind what is comfortable and familiar may seem like a high price to pay for following Jesus. Leaving them behind may seem scary. It might feel like dying. But if nothing else our faith proclaims that with every death there is a resurrection.