

Jesus always seems to have a way of shocking people into reality. He knew our human condition so well. He knew that a lot of times we don't listen or learn anything *unless* we are shocked; or made to feel uncomfortable; or given a struggle or challenge.

You might call today's gospel "a shocker *par excellence*."

*"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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

These words, taken literally, that is, at face value, are shocking enough to make even the greatest saint (and especially the literalist interpreter of the Bible!) feel uncomfortable and want to run in the opposite direction! It seems so strange for Jesus to use that word *hate* in reference to our spouse and family. After all, he was always preaching and teaching *love*, was he not? *Love your neighbor, love God, love yourself, love even your enemies.* I rather doubt that Jesus really wants us to take the word *hate* here literally, at face value.

However, knowing a little bit about the Hebrew language, and about Middle Eastern rhetoric, my sense is, these words of Jesus can be best understood as *hyperbolic* in nature. In Hebrew, you see, there are no nuances, no subtle ways of putting things. In Aramaic, the Hebrew variant Jesus speaks, it's either "love" or "hate," you're either "all in" or you're "all out" – there is no equivalent to our English "prefer" or "like," or more colloquially, "kinda." Jesus wants us to be "all in," loyal to him first and foremost above everything and everyone else.

So, translating into our more nuanced English, Jesus is likely saying to us something like this: "I know how weak you are. I know how easily you can fall away from me. I know that you are always tempted with the sin of idolatry – you can fall into the trap of worshipping and loving your spouse and family instead of – or ahead of – worshipping and loving me. I don't want you to do this. I want to protect you from this. That's why I'm shocking you into reality."

I know a woman who was raised an Episcopalian. She was confirmed in the Episcopal Church. When the time came for her to be married; there was some tension between herself and her spouse-to-be, who was raised in a fundamentalist church. Even though he was not as active in *his* church as she was in *hers*; he reluctantly agreed to be married in the Episcopal Church. After they were married, occasionally they'd attend the Episcopal Church. Then, as time went on, their church attendance petered out altogether. The woman made no effort to remain loyal to the faith in which she was raised.

What might we say happened here?

In this case, spouse and family became her number one priority – over and above Christ. And the result is...the *family* is who actually suffered. For in choosing to “drop out” for the sake of her husband, she also “dropped out” of the religious expression she should and could have passed on to her children. Even had she gone to his church, that would have been better than choosing to go to no church at all. Christ and Christ’s truth and priorities were “left on the cutting room floor.”

The words of our gospel today come as a warning to us all. We are to remain loyal to Jesus. He is to be our number one priority. Do we love, trust, value, and serve Christ more than anything or anyone? That’s the question he addresses each one of us individually – and collectively as a congregation. He shocks us into reality: “Whoever does not bear his or her own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus was always the practical realist. He never promised people an illusionary utopia or a Shangri-La or a castle in the clouds. He never led people into following him without them first carefully realizing how costly it would be for them. The greatest things in life are costly and involve much commitment and self-sacrifice and suffering.

In modern times, it was the Lutheran theologian and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who profoundly understood this and lived it out completely in his own life. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which I’ve quoted before, he said: “When Jesus calls a person, he bids them to come and die.” And, as you’ll recall, that’s what Bonhoeffer actually *did*. He brought the meaning of these words into living reality, when, in 1945, he died a martyr’s death. The cost of discipleship for Bonhoeffer and for anyone who calls him or herself a Christian can be nothing but a cross.

And that’s the point I think Jesus wants us to get today – even though the cross has not yet come for him personally as he speaks these words. The cross reminds us that if Jesus is worth *living* for because of what he has done for us; then he is also worth *dying* for. It’s not easy to be a Christian disciple, but then, it never was. If we’re truly loyal to him, we *will* face difficulties; we *will* experience sufferings; others *will* reject us. We *will* be tempted and attracted to seemingly better and easier lifestyles.

Anyone who lives in today’s Western world cannot help but be attracted and tempted to something “easier,” something “lesser” – because, let’s face it: there are countless ways and means of being preoccupied with pleasure, success and a life of comfort and ease. Incredibly, I have even seen churches that have succumbed to the modern-day mentality that abandons the cross for pleasure and success. You can see it in their advertisements: “Come to such-

and-such a Church, where Christianity is peddled as a path to material success and a happier, wealthier life!” Maybe they don’t say it in exactly those words – but it’s what they mean the reader or the viewer or listener to see.

Whenever the Church down through history has become too successful and popular by worldly standards, it has *a/ways* proved to be a sign of decay, which quite often led to some sort of tragedy. On the other hand, whenever the Church has faced hardships and persecution, it usually has grown and matured in the faith. Many Christians that I’ve known who have gone through tough times have told me that it helped their faith to grow and mature. Without hardships, sufferings, and challenges, we can very easily become bored, stale, apathetic and indifferent. Jesus knew that. That’s why it’s necessary for him to shock us into reality – like he does in our gospel today. He wants us to bear our cross, take risks and get involved.

If our faith in and love for Jesus is our greatest treasure and more valuable than all else; then we *will* bear our cross and make sacrifices for his sake and the sake of his realm. And today, he confronts us boldly – and even shockingly – to make that choice. Will it be Christ – or will it be our other priorities? Will we put something else first – or will we put Christ first? May our sovereign Lord grant us faith and strength to be loyal to him, to bear our cross and follow in his way.