

We cannot help but be struck with the harshness of today's gospel reading. The commandment to honor father and mother is a center piece of Christian moral theology. Did not Jesus love Mary and Joseph? Would he ask us to do any less? Neither have we ever understood radical poverty as critical component of salvation. We are not all called to monastic vocation. What about Christian marriage? When the Church teaches that human marriage should reflect the love between Christ and his Church, it seems somewhat unreal that we should be told that hating one's spouse and children are conditions of discipleship. These teachings are very strange. How do we deal with something as difficult to understand and accept as this passage from Luke's Gospel, today? It just seems totally disjointed. In a nutshell, this Gospel, at first blush, is just not Christ like.

Many would simply toss it out. We do not have that option; at least we don't if we would be loyal to the expectation that we follow the lectionary. The text would not be given us for this Sunday, if the Church did not believe that there is something most important, here. It is a matter of values. What matters most?

We begin to understand this text by looking at the values. We are asked to weigh the variables, the things of this world versus our eternal salvation. Put in this perspective, we begin to see where Jesus was coming from. A second point that helps us is the realization that in our Lord's time and culture, the culture of ancient Judaism, the idiom of language was an idiom of extremes. Nothing was slightly warm or cool. It was hot or cold. Said another way, language and expression did not deal well with shades of gray. Jesus thought and spoke as a first-century Palestinian Jew. People of our Lord's time would say that you should hate the one thing and love the other. What they meant was that one thing is more valuable than the other, so you should prefer it to the other. Family relationships are important, but not as important as our relationship with the Lord. Material comfort is both good and important, and we want to safeguard it. But clearly, material comfort is not as important as our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The point of this gospel passage is as straightforward as it can be. We should let nothing get between us and Jesus, because to do so is to risk cutting ourselves off from God. Jesus made the point this way: if God is not first in our lives, if our relationship with our Creator is not of primary importance, then we are simply unworthy as disciples.

There is a cost to discipleship. Saint Luke is very clear about this, in the gospel, today, and I'm convinced that Luke is accurately quoting Jesus. Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." When you read this closely, you realize that this is a very personalized demand. It is not a generic statement about discipleship. Christianity can never be a generalized thing. What the Lord was saying is that every one of us must bear his own, personalized cross, and carry that cross step-by-step with Jesus. What did Jesus mean by this?

To be a disciple is to be a student and an imitator of Jesus, but to be an effective disciple is to be a student of oneself. You have to know yourself and you have to know your values, and you have to be ready to crucify any part of yourself that distances you from God.

There is a cost to discipleship. Discipleship requires self-sacrifice. To insist on cost-free discipleship

is to insist on cheap grace and there simply is no such thing. There is unmerited grace, because we are unworthy of our Lord's sacrifice, but the grace is there for us, just the same, and it is ours at the price of the Cross. That is hardly cheap.

The Gospel this morning seems harsh, but it is realistic and tells us God's truth. If we would be faithful disciples, if we would follow Jesus, we ought to calculate the price and steel ourselves for the journey. We are never called to follow blindly. We are always called to follow courageously. *Amen.*