

Serious Christians know, from often painful personal experience, that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not easy. It is difficult, sometimes beyond all imagination. This is not to denigrate the joy of discipleship. There is nothing that we can do, no better way that we can spend our lives, than in the imitation of Christ, living in his service. Discipleship requires not just that we follow Jesus, but that we imitate Jesus by trying to be Christ to our neighbor. Discipleship requires that we try to live lives that reflect Christ, lives that are icons of Christ. It is just that simple, and it is just that hard. But, any other understanding cheapens the whole Christian message. Let me use, as an example, one of the bravest and most dedicated Christian disciples of the twentieth century. I'm speaking of the German *Evangelical* theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was also one of the greatest theologians of modern times. The Nazis murdered him because he refused to be silent in the face of Nazi atrocities.

Bonhoeffer lived what he preached, and what he preached is best described by the title of arguably his most famous book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer said that while God's grace is free, discipleship is never free. There is always a cost, a cost the disciple pays by sacrifice – self-sacrifice. Bonhoeffer said that to try to avoid this is to ask for cheap grace and there is no such thing as cheap grace. Jesus put it this way. "If anyone would come after me," Jesus said, "if anyone would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For, if anyone would save his life, he will lose it, but if he loses his life for my sake, he will find it." These are powerful words, with a weighty demand, but a demand we have to hear. We are either "all-the-way" Christians or we are not Christians at all. We are either in the boat with Jesus or we are not. There is no half way.

Luke tells us in the gospel reading this morning that our Lord had his face "set" on Jerusalem. This follows upon the Lord's statement that those who would be disciples must take up the cross. Let's unpack this. We have to note that Jesus was focused on obedience to his God the Father and the mission that God had given him. Jesus knew what awaited him. Going to Jerusalem meant one thing for Jesus - taking up his Cross. Jerusalem meant a death by torture that, by God's grace, resurrection would overcome. Did our Lord know what he was getting into? Yes, he did. Could he have bailed out? Yes, he could have. He did not have to die. He did not have to be scourged. But he chose that way because God his Father had set it out for him and, in obedience to God the Father Jesus took humanity's sins to the Cross.

In the Gospel story this morning, Jesus met three persons along that road to Jerusalem. The first said, "Lord, I'll follow you." For reasons we are not told, Jesus saw the offer as superficial. He pointed out that there was a cost, in this case a cost of personal comfort lost, to following him. Implicit in the story is that the cost, for this fellow, was too great.

To a second, Jesus said, "Follow me." The person responded that he would, but only after he had buried his dead. In very harsh language, Jesus told the man that if he would attach any conditions, then he was unworthy.

The third said he would follow, but after he said goodbye to his family. Our Lord's answer to him was the same. There can be no conditions to discipleship.

The expectations of these folk were not unreasonable. They were not asking for bad things. We deal with a different matter in the Epistle reading for this morning. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, we get the classic hit list of immoral conduct and a clear demand that Christians put such behavior aside. But that is relatively easy, if you are a good and self-disciplined person. The Gospel deals us a different hand, a hand that goes beyond good, moral living. The Gospel hand demands that we set the self aside and take up the cross of discipleship, and discipleship is the unending quest to know Christ and make him known.

The disciples' road is truly difficult road and a road less traveled. But, it is the Lord's highway and our Savior invites us to travel it with him. *Amen.*