

HOW EASY CAN IT BE?

Our story for the day begins by telling us that Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. Traditionally biblical interpreters have celebrated this as the start of the final journey of Jesus, leading ultimately to his crucifixion. As Jesus heads down that road to Jerusalem and on to his destiny he sends his disciples ahead to prepare his way. And on their way, they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready of him. However, the Samaritans refuse to receive him, because his face is set toward Jerusalem. So, the Disciples ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to consume them as Elijah had done. And Jesus rebuked them.

This text is followed by three encounters that Jesus has with people, each having to do with what it means to follow Jesus. Now on the surface these may appear to be isolated texts, different from each other in every way. However, I believe they are linked because they show a very common stumbling block that the Church of Jesus Christ faces even today.

We find that stumbling block in the refusal of the Samaritans to receive Jesus. Scripture records that the Samaritans rejected him because he had his face set on Jerusalem. Now, remember that the prevailing understanding in that day, in that culture was that life was based on honor and shame. If someone was treating you in a way that caused you to lose face, you needed to answer that challenge to your honor. That's the way that things worked. So, for Jesus to plan to pass through that area without stopping in that little village was perceived as an insult in the eyes of the Samaritans. I can see the important officials in that little town right now. "Why should we receive him?" they might have cried. "His face is set toward Jerusalem. He doesn't care about us. He isn't going to stop here. He isn't going to do anything for us. So, why should we receive him?"

By the same token the Disciples are insulted by the reaction of the Samaritans. To refuse to receive Jesus as he is passing through is an insult to their master. It's an insult to Jesus' honor. Why then does Jesus rebuke the Disciples?

To understand what is going here, I think we have to understand that following Jesus required the Disciples to break away from the norms of the society. They had been required to give up everything to follow Jesus. This passage shows the stark reality of the matter. They had failed to do so. They were still concerned about what people thought. The Samaritans and the Disciples were still playing this game of "who is the most important person here?". Who is the King of the Hill? They are valuing their own honor- both groups- over their call to serve God.

Let's look at the next three exchanges that Jesus has with people to get a feeling for this phenomenon. The first man comes up to Jesus and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." I have said that a time or two myself. It's funny how often "wherever you go" has a list of exclusions on it. It's funny how often I don't follow Jesus wherever he goes, but we'll set that aside for a moment. Jesus' responds, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

This is a very obscure saying. Great, I just told you I would follow you wherever you go, and you answered me with a poem. Great! However, it gives us the sense that following Jesus will mean giving up home and family. In the Ancient World it was considered strange, and even deviant, for a person to leave home and travel around. The home was the source of your livelihood. To leave was stupid- it was like cutting your own throat. Imagine for a moment that you decided to follow God, and to do it you were going to quit your job, leave your home, break off all contact with your family, and live hand to mouth on the street while spreading the Word of God. That's the kind of break Jesus is talking about. That's how severe this break is that he's calling for.

The next person Jesus meets is told, "Follow Me." The response is, "Lord, let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." Now the previous example tells us that our duty to God outweighs society obligations. This example tells us that our duty God outweighs even our obligations to our own family. This would be the most difficult thing for me personally. All my life my family has commanded my utmost loyalty. If any member of my family needs me, they know they have but to pick up the phone and I'll be there. However, the Scripture records that my obligation to God should outweigh my obligation to my family.

The third person Jesus encounters says, "I will follow you Lord, but first let me bid farewell to those at home." Jesus said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." This request to bid farewell is really a request to ease the transition, to make it easier to make this break. To make it easier to follow Jesus. But even that is being denied.

By now it must be apparent to you that Jesus considers following him to be no easy matter. Many of you will be aware that the Great turning point for the early church was the legalization of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine. Prior to this act, which occurred in 313 AD. Christianity was illegal in the Roman Empire. At that time only about 10% of the population of the Roman Empire was Christian. If you wanted to be a Christians you couldn't just "go before the Session", so to speak. You couldn't make a statement of faith, give your testimony and be baptized and that was the end of it. You had to complete a three-year probationary period. It was called a catechumenate, which is the root of our word catechism. During that time, you had to demonstrate that you intended to live as a Christian. If you didn't do it, they wouldn't let you in. If you wanted to be a Christian, you had to be serious. During this time, they would watch you to see if you were sincere in your intent. Only after this time were you baptized. If you made it through all of that you had to face the possibility of suffering death as a martyr. In short, you had to want to be a Christian in those days to join the church.

By contrast, by a century later only about 10% of the Roman Empire was non-Christian. Within a century that statistic flipped on its head! There was no catechumenate. Christianity was easy. It was fashionable to be a Christian by that time; it was cool. The result was that many of the new converts were marginal Christians at best. They didn't really take it seriously- at least from the perspective of the earlier Christians.

Is it easy today to become a Christian? In some ways it is. You can go to any church, walk in, sit down and listen and they will receive you there. But, in other ways, I would argue it isn't. Some years ago, we were involved in the Acts 16:5 Initiative. One of the things I like about the program was they said to be a Disciple really involves six defining practices. Christian disciples witness to the Lord and Savior, they're involved in prayer, they care for one another, they are steeped in the Word of Jesus Christ, when they lead, their principle of leadership is "with me"- "come do this with me."- and lastly, they are sent out into the world to spread these practices. That's easy to say. How dedicated are we to that model of discipleship in our own lives?

When I lived in Waycross, Ga., my next-door neighbor was a man named Mike. Mike's father had been a lay preacher in the Baptist Church. Mike was a good man, but he had real problems with alcohol and drug abuse. He had suffered some physical and emotional abuse at the hands of his father. One day Mike had asked his father, "Do you really believe what you preach?" His father's response had stayed with me. He said, "If I'm wrong, I've lost nothing. If I'm right, I've gained everything." At the time I agreed with that. Not today. Being a follower of Jesus Christ- really being a follower of Jesus- is neither easy nor cheap. It comes at a cost, which might be a very heavy price to pay indeed.

I want to introduce you to a name you may not have heard. I don't know how many of you have heard of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German preacher. He left Germany as the Nazis rose to power. But some spirit from God called him to go back to Germany and stand against the oppression the Nazis were preaching. So, he did. He was safe. He was here in the US, and he went back to Germany to say, "This is wrong. This is not the way that God wants things to be. The oppression against the Jews in the Holocaust, this is wrong." For making that stand he was arrested, and just a few days before World War II ended, he was killed. During his time in Germany, he wrote several books, one of which is called The Cost of Discipleship. He labeled the notion that we can receive grace and not follow Jesus as cheap grace. His Discipleship cost him very dearly, as it did many of the early Christians who marched into the arena to face lions.

The price of following Jesus can be very heavy, so heavy that most of us won't even try to live up to the standard we see here in front of us.

Paying this price is heavy. It costs our control of our lives and our situations. It means, as our forefather's said in a different context, the willingness to risk our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor." The payoff, however, is also high. The payoff is being a true servant of Jesus.

If being a true servant of Jesus is worthwhile, how easy can it be? Nothing that's truly worthwhile is cheap or easy. The really meaningful things are all hard. It's not very easy to follow Jesus Christ. It requires putting God and neighbor first. It requires giving all glory, laud and honor to Jesus Christ- we can't take credit for what is done. It requires giving up our control, even to the point of losing everything. But it's worth it. Doing this won't be easy or

cheap- in fact, we can't do it at all without God's help. This has already cost a life. It cost the life of our Lord and Savior Jesus. But because that price has been paid, it can be done.