

This is one of those gospel lessons, that that gives preachers heart burn. If you're going to be a good disciple you have to hate your family, hate life itself, pick up your cross, and sell all your possessions. Uffda, I'll be completely honest, if that's what discipleship requires, I'm pretty sure I'm not cut out for it...

Jesus' ministry had attracted a large number of people. And not just showing up to listen, these people were traveling with him. Lives were being changed... People wished to be like him, to be one of his disciples. And Jesus sets an almost impossible standard!

Jesus also gives us some illustrations of people who start something and can't complete it. And people who don't finish the project are either ridiculed or defeated.

Jesus is serious about discipleship. And let's just say that the cost is high, few if anyone can actually pay it. Imagine being with Jesus, and hearing these things... I don't know about you, but I think I would be packing up and going home. Some scholars have suggested that Jesus said these things exactly for that purpose; suggesting that Jesus intended to reduce the number of people following him.

Personally, I don't know, Jesus might be doing a little exaggeration, but I also think Jesus is downright serious, he's intentional and giving direction to what discipleship means. This morning I'd like to do some reflecting about discipleship and transformation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote an enormously influential book first published in 1937 called *The Cost of Discipleship*. He talked at length about what he called cheap

grace. Essentially, it's the idea that the church developed a form of religion that was gospel without law, forgiveness without repentance, and a discipleship without a cost... He believed that a tradition of cheap grace is what caused a decline in the Christian church, the Christian church in Europe at that time.

Bonhoeffer's argument is that if Christianity doesn't cost anything, if it doesn't require you to do anything, then it doesn't address the cross, it doesn't address pain and suffering, and consequently it becomes a religion that isn't life giving and soon it becomes unimportant and forgotten. Is this where we are today? Mumm... Maybe...

People were following Jesus because he healed them... People followed Jesus because he was life giving... Jesus transformed their lives. And people continued to follow Jesus, even though the cost of discipleship was virtually impossible.

I had a professor in seminary who liked to say, "Antinomianism is the common flu of Lutheranism." Big words, it just means that sometimes we can be so gospel oriented, we aren't serious about the law. It was his way to remind us that we are both law and gospel people, we preach both / and...

Taking a note from Bonhoeffer, perhaps for the church to be as relevant today as it was in the first century, we need to recommitment to serious discipleship. Instead of saying, "your just fine, don't need to change anything..." To a discipleship that says, "There is transformation in following Jesus. It is painful, and it is also worth it!" Do you see the difference?

I think this is where we encounter our reading for today. Jesus is talking about the cost of discipleship, and it's not nilly-willy fun and games, it's serious stuff! I think Jesus is serious, exactly because of the potential for blessing and transformation!

This morning I'd like to reflect about a spiritual principle that is absolute truth, and it is also a paradox... It's counter intuitive, it's hard for us to see...

It is a fundamental truth that Jesus points us too, again and again and again. Essentially, it's the simple idea that pain leads to gain. Picking up our crosses means crucifying ourselves in service to others. The idea that abundant life is in serving, not in being served. The fundamental truth is that God transforms this pain of serving into meaning and purpose. Which is absolutely life giving!

You see, sometimes being a disciple means we have to do things we don't want to do; there's pain and suffering in being a disciple. Doing things, we don't want to do is hard medicine. This is why I think work is sometimes the best remedy for people going through a hard time.

And here's the paradox about pain and suffering, for as much as we dislike suffering, for some reason, suffering brings transformation. I can't explain it, but for those who have endured great suffering, they are often more empathetic, more gracious, more understanding, more loving, more generous, wise... Does this describe anyone you might know?

This fits a spiritual pattern, a pattern we see often in scripture that is fundamentally counter-intuitive. The path to eternal life goes through death. The path to

forgiveness goes through confession. The path to wholeness goes through disease. The path to righteousness goes through sinfulness. The path to wisdom goes through folly. The path to the Kingdom of God goes through loving our enemies... Do you see the cross-shaped pattern in all this?

This is not some hocus pocus pie in the sky magic; this is real, authentic and genuine... it's as if suffering itself is a teacher of sorts... And believe me, we'll do anything to avoid it. We certainly don't go looking for it. But it will eventually find us, it will come to us...

The Jesus shaped life trusts that when we encounter suffering; ultimately, we will be blessed. It's like resurrection, its counter intuitive, and it's also the truth. This is a fundamental truth about who you are, who God is, and how the universe is wired...

There's the pain and suffering of serving one another, then there's plain old pain and suffering...

Quick story... For twelve years when I was at St Olaf, on Tuesday mornings I gathered with a group in the chapel to say prayers. I guess you could say we were a discipleship group. There was a certain couple, I'll just call them Bill and Mary that were an important part of that ministry team. They were there religiously; they never missed. They were committed to coming. Bill had all kinds of health issues... He was often in pain-- but he made himself come!

I always appreciated Bill's prayers. He often started each prayer with a verse from psalm 118, "This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." I will always remember his gentle spirit and his genuine joy of just simply being together... together in prayer.

Bill prayed from his heart. He had a capacity to see the good in people and he cared deeply about others. Bill prayed with an intimacy that always moved me. He walked with God every moment of every day!

I did Bill's funeral four years ago. And perhaps a month before he passed away; I went to visit them. Bill was sitting in his chair; he had cancer and was in a lot of discomfort. We shared communion; I said some prayers. And Bill prayed too, perhaps some of the most moving prayers I have ever heard.

He poured out his heart about his love for Mary and the family. Through tears and hugs, I thought of that reading from First Corinthians: "Love is patient; love is kind... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things... endures all things... Love never ends." It is so true...

In the midst of pain and suffering, God came to Bill and transformed the circumstances into a proclamation of love. I can't explain it, it's a mystery. Believe me, it was God's miracle.

Suffering is around us all the time, we speak the truth, we love one another, we trust in God's love and mercy, and suffering never gets the last word! That's the good news today... Suffering never gets the last word. We are people of

resurrection. We are transformed in love and service. God works miracles all the time!

The cost of discipleship is high, and the blessing of discipleship is beyond anything we can imagine. God transforms pain and suffering... And it looks different for everyone...

Sometimes we have to be intentional about picking up that cross. Sometimes we have to make ourselves love the neighbor... Sometimes we have to pay a price... And blessings come! Transformation happens...

We are disciples; it's our baptismal identity. We have been given the Holy Spirit... Grab it, trust it... Work into it... Make yourself do it... Abundant life is yours as you go out there and love and serve others... Abundant life is yours through all circumstances.

Amen