

Luke 14: 25-33 Discipleship and Crosses

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Chapter 14 as we have read from it has been focused on some expectations for our behavior, on what it means to become one who follows this man Jesus. We are not to seek to exalt ourselves but neither are we to behave with hypocritical humility. We are to seek out and offer to the least, the lost, the lowly care for which we will not receive repayment—probably meaning we are also not to think highly of ourselves for these actions. These are things that run against our culture of “me first” mentality. And as we near the end of this chapter we encounter some more exhortations which are counter-cultural. This passage’s beginning seems to resemble Jesus’ statement from chapter 13 that he did not come to bring peace but dissent. Jesus is on his rather rambling journey to Jerusalem as recounted by Luke and here there is a large crowd traveling with him. As they are going, he turns to them and gives them a standard for how to move out of the “crowd” and become a follower—a disciple. “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.” Whoa—if we take this literally, that’s quite a demand. That is a wide sweeping declaration including all those with whom close relationships usually exist. In Matthew’s gospel there is a parallel passage which directly follows Jesus’ disclaimer that he did not come to bring peace. In it the dissent among family members is due to not all becoming his followers. There following Jesus is the highest priority. It is framed with a different anchoring parameter however. Matthew 10: 37-38 “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,” etc. That appears more palatable to us being framed in degrees of love, not hate. In reality it may not be easy to accomplish, but at least it sounds like it might be more acceptable. We know that we should put Jesus first, that following the precepts of our faith should be the number one priority for us. But the concept of needing to hate those other types of relationships is a much stronger exhortation than needing to love more. So if Matthew and Luke are reporting on the same conditions asked of disciples, why does Luke’s passage express this with such greater intensity? Luke’s version of this demand is clearly about discipleship, about following Jesus. But this call to hate-- is so unpleasant that it makes us uncomfortable. In Luke, Jesus also commands us to love our enemies and do them good, so here the call for hating cannot mean what we usually think of in connection with hate. We think of hate as intending harm to another. This requirement for discipleship cannot mean actively trying to do family members harm if we are not even to hate, but love our enemies. So what was Luke trying to convey to his listeners? Jesus was asking disciples to participate in a radically different way of life. When putting obedience and devotion to Jesus ahead of any family commitment the result may look like hate and rejection to the family and to the rest of the world whose values are no longer accepted or followed. The choice made to follow Jesus may also look and feel like hating if the choice means moving physically or emotionally farther from the family, their values and traditions. The twelve who have been with Jesus almost from the beginning have left behind their homes and families and gone on the road with Jesus. Their choice to answer that call to discipleship disrupted completely their previous lives. When Jesus is addressing this crowd traveling with him, he is warning these would-be disciples that in order to come with him through this social disruption and dislocation which putting his teaching into

practice will cause, they need to face how it will be interpreted and how it will feel when they are no longer able to be a part of their current community. When this narrative was composed Christianity was very new in the world. Those who chose this path did not have a supportive institutionalized and recognized place in the world they inhabited which recognized Jesus or his teachings, so the consequences of becoming a disciple were stark—it often led to persecution and alienation from their former community. In today’s world there are still places where that is true—Coptic Egyptians and other Christians in the Middle East are some examples of how following Christ can lead to their being hated by those around them. That is not true in our community—claiming to be Christian does not lead to persecution. Despite the claim of some, being Christian here is not a source of real persecution—it does not result in torture or loss of property as in other places in the world. Being Christian is no longer the exclusive option but that is not persecution. Christianity is an accepted part of the social and political structure of our culture. But the current question becomes whether or not those who claim the name are truly followers—disciples—of Christ or are they members of the crowd going along for the ride as long as it does not require any cross bearing. Because the second demand found in this passage for someone to be a follower of Jesus is just that—“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” Within the context of the gospel, those who are hearing this story know, just like we do, about the cross that Jesus will carry. Jesus is telling those who surround him that there will be a cost to becoming a disciple. For those first century believers the image of the cross would have been literal. Hearing this phrase they did not first think of taking on extra responsibilities or bearing up patiently under a burden. They probably heard it as a call to put their lives on the line as a consequence of following Jesus. Yet at this point in the narrative, the events in Jerusalem are still in the future and that interpretation is something called foreshadowing. The inclusion of hating life itself in that list seems to give weight to that view. But the illustrations which Jesus uses next do not seem to be asking this of a disciple. When trying to discern what cross we are to bear, this verse often causes us some discomfort. We don’t exactly know how to determine what our discipleship will cost us. In general, we don’t like to pursue things that will cost us—and we are very much like those in the scenarios Jesus described in this passage—we like to calculate or estimate what a certain course of action will cost us. We will weigh one option against another, trying to decide if we have enough or want it enough or need it enough to pay the price. We like the options that provide more reward for us than it costs to obtain them. Jesus’ illustrations are simple. Before you start a project, in the first case, you determine if you have the resources to finish it or you might be embarrassed; in the second case, before a king begins a war he tries to determine if he has the resources to win it. If he doesn’t, then peace is sought before engagement perhaps with the loss of face or the paying of a penalty, but not loss of life. Jesus is telling those in the crowd that following him is going to be expensive—it will cost them in relationships with others as their loyalty must be to him and what he has taught them about God’s kingdom—the reign of God which has come near through him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book which is titled “The Cost of Discipleship” which has come to be associated with extreme self sacrifice as he was martyred during the reign of Hitler in Germany. But when you read the book itself, the cost which Bonhoeffer describes more closely resembles the fundamental obedience and loyalty to Jesus and his teaching by the choices made in your life. What Jesus demands of disciples is commitment in terms of our time, attention and money. This discipleship is not about salvation

as the cross that Christ carried accomplished that. God's grace alone finished and completed our justification. Discipleship is about covenant living. It is about the relationship we have with God. We prefer to focus on God's own covenant loyalty to redeem and save, but there is also a covenant loyalty expected from us in return. Jesus is telling the crowd that being his disciple is entering into a commitment for a journey which once begun is to be continued to the end. Following Jesus is an all or none proposition, not a partial or temporary thing. The concluding summary makes the connections clear: "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." For Bonhoeffer the withholding of total obedience was seeking to have "cheap grace." This passage speaks to the importance of loyalty and allegiance to Jesus over all other competing loyalties including family, self-interest, and possessions. That still leaves us with the issue of determining what "carrying the cross" means in terms of discipleship. For many hearing this passage the image refers to some major spiritual travail, some significant suffering or sacrifice which happens in their lives. I think the language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse in this context. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions or trying family relationships. Those are events in our lives; not usually choices we have made out of a commitment to God. Carrying our cross is instead what we chose to do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. If this is what it means, then we are invited to take up our cross by having our life and the decisions we make each day shaped by our commitment to Jesus who chose to carry a particular cross for our salvation. The choices we make can happen anywhere, anytime, and about just about anything. When we offer our time, talent, and labor to God we are carrying our cross by allowing the whole of our lives to be shaped by our commitment to Christ and Christ's teachings about God's kingdom. God's grace was not cheap; the cost was the life of Jesus Christ on that cross. Our response to that grace—covenant relationship with God can be difficult at times as what God desires for us is so different from what the world proclaims as desirable. But God's grace is also abundant and ever present as is the call to become a disciple who leaves behind the crowd to follow Jesus. Perhaps when we see answering the call as this re-orientation of our lives into the ways of God's reign in all aspects of our lives we will view this as choosing life in the fullest and richest sense. Being a disciple in this manner is a way of being; a way of living differently because of Christ's presence in our lives. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.