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"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciple." "Whoever ... does not hate ... life itself cannot be my disciple." "You can[not] become my disciple ... [unless you] give up all your possessions." Swell! Anybody else want to preach this morning?

I'm pretty sure that this passage is not meant to be taken literally. But that doesn't mean that we can just blink it away. We may not take it literally, but we *do* need to take it *seriously*. The harsh and uncompromising language that Jesus uses is meant to shake us up, and to grab our attention. He is working overtime to get through to us. We would be fools to not listen.

But what, exactly – or inexactly – is he trying to say? We know what words he uses, more or less, subject to the usual concerns about reducing an oral tradition to writing, and translating it into first one language and then another and another. We know what Jesus said, but the real question is what is he *driving* at? What is the bee in his bonnet?

Let's start with "Give up all your possessions." Actually, the world would be a better place if I did take this literally since I use up far more than my fair share of the earth's resources and occupy much too large a footprint. But Jesus is not concerned in this passage with the distribution of wealth or the protection of the environment. What is eating at him is our human tendency to become so attached to material things that they wind up distorting our values and determining our self-worth. Our possessions begin to possess *us*. We are so busy acquiring, preserving and maintaining worldly goods that we become distracted from the way of the Cross. As Nancy Miller put it in a recent sermon, we lose sight of not just *who* we are but *whose* we are. Therefore, Jesus's message is that in order to follow him we have to free ourselves from the grip of our possessions.

More troubling to me is the second requirement that Jesus lays down: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate ... life itself cannot be my disciple." Of course this does not mean that we should literally hate life. After all, it was breathed into us by the Almighty, who expressed delight in our creation. We are, in the words of the Psalmist, "fearfully and wonderfully made." So then, what could Jesus be driving at?

I think that the “hate your life” message is directed at those among us who think that they’ve got it all figured out, that they have it all together, that the world exists to do their bidding. So long as they remain self-satisfied and committed to life as it is, they will never follow Christ. What concerns me, however, is that there are many among us who are so discouraged, so heartbroken, so dispirited, or so depressed that they find it next to impossible to feel good about their lives. We need to make crystal clear to them – and to *you* if you recognize yourself in what I am saying – that the Son of God does not *want* us to be despondent. On the contrary. He wants for us greater joy and greater possibilities than we can possibly imagine. Jesus’s point is that we should not make our peace with the satisfactions of the world as we find it, and should not settle for what can be accomplished by human striving alone. If we follow him, there is *so much more* that awaits us.

Finally, we come to the most difficult statement of them all: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters ... cannot be my disciple.” What on earth does this mean? How does this square with the commandments elsewhere in Scripture to honor these relationships? For me the answer begins with a recognition that at any given time most of us have multiple relationships and loyalties. We are a daughter and mother at the same time, or a brother and an uncle. Or we are close friends with more than one person at a time. These multiple loyalties are usually quite compatible, but they do sometimes bump up against one another. In the ordinary course of our lives, there are occasions when one relationship absorbs so much of our time and energy that we give less attention than we might wish to our other relationships. Parents devote a disproportionate amount of time to a child who is gravely ill, hoping and praying that their other children will understand. We wind up as the primary caretaker for an aunt or uncle in need, or perhaps a neighbor whose life spins out of control, even though it takes us away from spending time with others who also matter deeply to us. In such circumstances, it is not that we hate our other children or our spouse of whoever we are paying less attention to than we might like. It is just that for a period of time another relationship takes priority, simply by virtue of the given circumstances.

What Jesus is driving at in this morning's Gospel lesson is that our relationship with him is primary. Not because he is an egomaniac, but because our relationship with him is the foundation for every other relationship we have. It is the relationship that grounds us, and that teaches us how to love and care for one another. This doesn't mean that we should literally hate everyone else in our lives, or forego other meaningful relationships. But it does mean that at times taking up the Cross requires that we take time away from other relationships and hope and pray that our loved ones will understand.

Jesus makes a related point as well. Discipleship is costly. It requires a commitment, of time, energy, and emotion. It requires a commitment of the heart as well. Much is made in the popular press these days of a new disease called "compassion fatigue." We are told that humans beings cannot care about more than one crisis or tragedy at a time. Well, one of the consequence of being a disciple is that we don't get to succumb to this particular disease, at least not for long. Fortunately, we have access to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. Discipleship also requires a commitment of our treasure. Or to be more precise, a willingness to give back to God a portion of the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. (How's that for a not very subtle shot across the bow in anticipation of this Fall's stewardship campaign).

Discipleship, following Jesus, is costly. It can strain our friendships. It can lead to fishy-eyed stares. Ask any teenager. They know first hand that living out their faith can sometimes lead to uncomfortable moments when hanging out with their peers. But then again, the same is true for adults. In the business world once word gets out that you go to church because you actually want to (as opposed to because it is the socially appropriate thing to do), some of your colleagues may begin to question whether you have what it takes to make tough-minded choices. In the academic world, and this I know from first hand experience, letting it be known that you are a believer can make people think that your brains must have fallen out of your head. And on the home front – across the back fence, at the supermarket, or in the dining room – there will be some people who are scared to death that you are constantly judging them and finding them wanting, simply because you profess the faith of Christ crucified.

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But here's the thing. Whatever we endure in Jesus's name is but a trifle compared to what he endured in our name. And whatever commitments we make to him pale in comparison to his commitment to us. "Lo I will be with you, even to the end of the age." And most remarkably of all, he knows us through and through, and loves us anyway.

Love yourself. Honor your father and your mother, your sisters, your brothers, your spouse. Raise your children in the understanding that the kingdom of heaven exists for such as they. But *follow* Jesus. *Follow* him. Straight into the heart of God.

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