

Absolute Demand/Radical Grace

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7. *We form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.*
8. *We recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil and renunciation of privilege.*
—from “The Eight Points of Progressive Christianity”

Reading: Luke 14:24-35

David Reed, former pastor of Madison Ave. Presbyterian Church, tells a story of two men who were riding a train near London:

One man said to the other, “Look over there. That man sitting over there—that’s the Archbishop of Canterbury.”

The other man said, “You’re crazy. I know what the Archbishop looks like, and that’s not him.”

The first man replied, “Look, I’m positive. I’ll bet you 50 pounds that that is the Archbishop.”

“You’re on!”

So he went over to the older gentleman and said, “Excuse me, sir. My friend and I were wondering—are you the Archbishop of Canterbury?”

Whereupon he replied, “Why don’t you mind your own damn business? Leave me the hell alone!”

So the man went back to his friend and said, “Well, the bet is off. He won’t answer the question, and we still don’t know if he’s the Archbishop.”

Now, I suppose that it *could* have been the Archbishop. He could have been having a bad day or may have just received some distressing news. He’s human, too.

But most of the time we expect that Christians can be recognized in the world. This, after all, is what discipleship is. Discipleship allows us to be recognized.

Today we conclude a series of sermons on the question, “What do we mean when we call ourselves a progressive Christian community?” We’ve been using the “Eight Points of Progressive Christianity” as a springboard for our discussion. And the final two points are about this question of discipleship. They say that progressive Christianity involves rolling up our sleeves and equipping each other to *work* and that following Jesus is *costly*.

In the passage from the New Testament Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not *hate* his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even one’s own life, that person *cannot* be my disciple.” (By the way, next time you run into someone who insists that the whole Bible is literally true, you might want to ask if they hate their mother, father, etc. You could point out, what about Luke 14:26? Because, of course, this is not *literally* true.)

Rather, what Jesus *meant* by this is that nothing, no person, can take precedence over the way of Jesus. That is, if it comes down to a choice, followers are to choose. Followers of Jesus hate all these things and people only when in comparison to the singular love for Jesus and his message.

Because what Jesus is talking about here are the distinctive marks of being a disciple. How can we recognize if we are true disciples of Jesus or not? Luke has Jesus saying, “Whoever does not bear one’s own cross and come after me, *cannot be my disciple*.” Now many scholars do not believe that Jesus said these actual words, since they reference the crucifixion that hadn’t occurred yet. But the writers of Luke rightly knew that Jesus set some pretty high standards by taking the path that he chose. “What are you willing to die for?” is a question one must answer if one is to be a disciple of Jesus because Jesus, himself, had to answer it. One must wrestle with it and come to terms with it.

Let’s read on further in our passage:

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first set down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he had laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him.

Jesus may be quoting some proverbial wisdom of his day, or the editors of Luke may have added this afterwards to illustrate that one must consider whether one is actually ready for total discipleship or not. One cannot avoid it. He seems to be saying, “If you’re coming with me, you have to be willing to die. Count the cost and do it *now*, before the moment of truth.” The allegory continues:

What king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an envoy to ask for terms of peace.

If there is one thing that marks discipleship is seriousness; it is not to be undertaken lightly. And because of this, the followers should not decide on discipleship without advance, mature self-probing. Like the king, one must decide while “a great way off.”

Now, human nature being what it is, there is always a part of us which is not resolved. And the answering of this question becomes a lifelong quest.

After all, even Peter appeared to be so sure and said, “Jesus, I’d die for you.” But when the moment of truth came, he could not do it. The bloodthirsty crowd called to him, “You! You were with him!” “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Peter. What would have you said? So it is a continual quest, is it not?

The church has survived all these years only because individuals have gotten the better part of this question.

In 1523 there were two young men in Brussels who were burned at the stake. Their crime was their profession of the reformed faith; they refused to recant their affirmation of faith when threatened with death, as so they were martyred in the public square. (What would have you said?)

And this was the occasion that Martin Luther wrote the hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is our God,” to celebrate the courageous faith for which they died.

In our story today, it’s almost as if Jesus is saying, “So. You really want to be a disciple? Really?” This is a costly way of suffering and sacrifice; there’s simply no way around it.

In the New Testament the disciples left their boats, their jobs, and their families. But still they were asked to give up more. As it turns out, Jesus was demanding, literally, their lives. So. You want to be a disciple? There is still time to back out.

What we are talking about is one of the great paradoxes of the gospel: “For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for the sake of the gospel will save it.” Is there a more beautiful verse in the whole Bible? Is there any which reaches closer to the very heart of the gospel? It points to the truth that the more we tend to secure our lives, make them safe, the more we tend to really lose them and what they are all about. And the more we are willing to risk the gospel way, the richer and fuller our lives become.

Dietrick Bonhoeffer, that great theologian and resister of the Nazis, wrote about this great costly discipleship:

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves... Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which one must knock... It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives one the only true life.

The church often tries to domesticate this message and soften the challenge. But the absolute demand remains. I like how Annie Dillard put it in one of her books:

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. (from Teaching a Stone to Talk)

I was thinking about how the cost of discipleship stretches us and pulls us into uncomfortable territory sometimes when I heard what Glenn Beck, a political commentator said last week. He said,

Look for the words social justice or economic justice on your church website. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes! If you have a priest that is pushing social justice, go find another parish.

Wow. I find this disturbing on so many levels. First, it would be difficult to show more disrespect to faith communities than to openly encourage members to leave their current church. I find this breathtaking.

If you go to the U.C.C. denominational website you'll find talk about social and economic justice, just as you will on many of our congregations' sites, as well. So I guess that Mr. Beck is talking about us.

Now, I used to think that everyone just knew that justice was an integral part of the gospel message. "Let justice flow down like waters" seems pretty straightforward to me. So it's perhaps most disturbing that some people actually say that justice is unchristian! And so it is now absolutely crucial that there are progressive Christians who do not run away from this term and clearly affirm, as in Point #7, that we "strive for peace and justice among all people."

And again, I remind you that *justice is always social*. That is, it is different from individual acts of charity. Justice involves the *collective* action of society itself. It's about a *fair system*. Acts of compassion are good. Sometimes you need to address the immediate pain or hunger or suffering. But justice takes us further to address root causes. It is about changing laws and policies and how our social system is organized. Bandages are important to stop the immediate bleeding, but justice helps people from being cut and wounded in the first place. In the past several years some say that the government is evil, that it must be dismantled. Karl Rove famously said he wants it "small enough to drown in the bathtub." But justice affirms that government is good, and it can and should act as an instrument of God's compassion.

The church, it seems obvious to me, affirms the call to work for *both* charity and justice. And yet, justice is far more unpopular. And we need desperately more churches who are willing to stand up for social justice despite those who would try to shout us down.

And so we come back to the costly discipleship again. The cross was not something you got when you were compassionate. It came because you *threatened the established order*. Who got the cross?

Those who stood up for religious expression.

Those who stood up for fair and equal treatment for racial minorities and women.

Those, in each generation, who stood up to power, to aggression, to violence.

Those who stood up, like Jesus, for the least of those in the world.

Who got the cross? As John Dominic Crossan wrote,

Those who work for compassion are often canonized.

Those who work for justice are often crucified.

That wonderful peace activist, Daniel Berrigan, talked about how the costly discipleship flowed most from a call to work for justice. He said,

We have assumed the name of peacemakers, but we have been, by and large, unwilling to pay any significant price. And because we want the peace with half a heart and half a life and will, the war, of course, continues, because the waging of war, by its nature, is total—but the waging of peace, by our own cowardice, is partial. So a whole will and a whole heart and a whole national life bent toward war prevail over the mere desire for peace.... There is no peace because the making of peace is at least as costly as the making of war—at least as exigent, at least as disruptive, at least as liable to bring disgrace and prison and death in its wake.

Waging peace should cost at least as much as waging war.

You know, there is this ever-present “Jesus fish” that you can see plastered on the back of cars. It comes from the word, “ichthys,” which is the first letter of each word in the phrase, “Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior.” These initials spell the Greek word for “fish.” So the early Jesus followers adopted the fish as their symbol.

Then came along this clever little fish with two feet added to the bottom and the name, “Darwin” printed on the body. This has made some Christians upset at this playful adaptation, and I have seen new bumper stickers of a Darwin fish in one of those red circles with the line through the middle.

And then, more recently, I saw a Jesus fish with the “truth” emblazoned on it, and it was actually *eating* a Darwin fish. I am not making this up!

Now personally, I’d like to think they could both swim or walk peaceably, side by side, on the same bumper. They should kiss, even.

But you know, the Jesus fish turned into a shark has reminded me about how arrogance has been superimposed upon Jesus and his fish. A symbol of what one is willing to die for becomes a symbol of what one is willing to kill for. A symbol of our own suffering is turned into a symbol of others' suffering. Certainly Jesus not mean this.

Friends, the demand of God upon our lives is absolute. It is unquenchable. Jesus invites us to follow him and join in the unpopular and perilous struggle for justice and waging of peace. The more that we follow the costly way of Jesus, the more it humbles us, and the more we realize just how impossible it really is. And seeing this , we realize how we rely not on our own efforts but upon the unconditional love and acceptance of God.

God's demand is absolute, yet so is God's love. Discover one, and you will discover the other.