

John Docherty, August 14, 2016
The cost of discipleship

The theme for today's service, as it appears on our church calendar, is "Giving up possessions". That theme is taken from the final words of the passage we read from Luke, from the New Revised Standard Version, which is our usual translation. In that version, Jesus offers a couple of parables about counting the cost of discipleship, and finishes up with the admonition that "you cannot be my disciple unless you give up all your possessions."

That particular admonition seems to me to be a bit of a non-sequitur. It's not inherently inconsistent with Jesus' parables about counting the cost, but it's surely not the only measure of faithful discipleship. If it *is* the only, or even the principal, measure of faithfulness, then I suspect most of us are in serious trouble.

It is possible, of course, to engage in some mental gymnastics in order to apply this measure to ourselves even as we accumulate possessions over the course of our lifetime.

"These things I possess, I simply hold in trust, because I've placed everything in God's hands.

Yes, I own a house, but the front door is open to anyone who needs a roof over their head;

Yes, I have money in the bank, but I try to use it wisely, as a steward of God;

Yes, I carry a smartphone with multiple bells and whistles (including the odd addictive game of some kind), but it's merely a tool that allows me to be more effective and responsive to the needs of those around me, because it means I'm more accessible;

Yes, I have a car, and camping equipment, and a bicycle, and tools, and a wardrobe full of clothes, and books galore, and a TV, and DVDs, and all kinds of comfortable furniture, and a computer, and musical instruments, and paintings, and gifts that I've received over the years ...

but I'm poor in spirit.

I don't cling to any of these things. It's just stuff. My heart is following Gold,

I mean God."

Sorry ... somehow an “I” slipped in there by mistake.

In this meditation, I'd like to have a run at the proposed theme by splitting it up a bit and shifting the it slightly : i.e. Looking at “the cost of discipleship” as the overarching theme, and “giving up one's possessions” as a separate element of that theme.

Mind you, separating “giving up possessions” from the cost of discipleship is probably a bit problematic.

In point of fact, Jesus not infrequently demands exactly that form of discipleship from those who would follow him.

Apart from this occasion here in Luke, Jesus elsewhere tells his disciples to leave everything behind and follow him.

He tells the rich young ruler to go and sell all that he has if he wants to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

When he sends out seventy of his disciples to preach in various towns he specifically tells them to take nothing, and to depend on the generosity of those who will hear their message.

As far as his own lifestyle goes, he is described as having nowhere to lay his head. He's basically an itinerant, dependant upon the good will of those who respond to his message.

The very early church, as presented in the Book of Acts, also seemed to understand that this was part of what it meant to be a Christian : (Acts 4:32) “... and the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and soul: and not one of them said that aught of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.”

That, unfortunately, is the first and last reference to that understanding.

Let me approach the idea by reading the Luke passage again, but this time from the Revised Standard Version, and by adding a couple of earlier verses that were conveniently dropped from the passage that was read.

The RSV puts the passage this way, starting at verse 25 instead of verse 28 :

“Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and

brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build, and was not able to finish.' Or 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 embassy and asks terms of peace. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

There are at least three things that jump out at me from this passage, and I'll try to address them as best I can.

The first is the verse that states that "... If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple ..."

It's a harsh sounding requirement, to hate one's own family, so let me make quick work of it before we go any further.

The Greek word translated as "hate" is "μίξέω", and "hate", apparently, is the appropriate translation. It's the word we draw on for terms like 'misanthrope', or 'misogynist'.

So what do you do with this kind of language?

The temptation is to read it literally and to understand it to mean that if even our family were to get between us and our love for God, that we should be prepared, and perhaps expected, to have an emotional revulsion for their resistance.

The best treatment of this possibility I came across while preparing this message came from Leon Morris' commentary on Luke. He puts it this way :

"There is no place in Jesus' teaching for literal hatred. He commanded His followers to love even their enemies, so it is impossible to hold that He is here telling them literally to hate their earthly nearest. But hating can mean something like loving less. Jesus' meaning is surely that the love the disciple has for Him must be so great that the best of earthly loves is hatred by comparison."

That answers it well enough for me.

The second thing that stands out in this passage is the couple of parables that promote the idea of counting the cost of discipleship.

“The cost of discipleship”.

This is probably the term, or phrase, that has most defined my own sense of what it means to be a faithful Christian.

I take from it the obvious fact that there *is*, or should be, a cost to being a disciple of Christ. It isn't, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a question of an easy ride; access to “cheap grace”.

I've been attracted to, and struggled with, the implications of this idea since my earliest exposure to Christian living – and by that I mean not just my exposure as a young adult to a form of evangelical, personal commitment, “Jesus is the answer”, Christian living, in which the “cost” was largely tied to a willingness to get out there and promote the particular understanding of salvation that is tied to that vision.

I think I can fairly say that “the cost of discipleship” was already anchored in my soul as a young boy in the Catholic Church.

It was manifested in slightly different ways from the evangelical form of the cost of discipleship, of course. It was much less tied to evangelism, for example, and much more tied to the personal struggle for devotion as expressed in self-sacrifice :

- the disciplines of Lent
- no eating of meat on Fridays
- constant self-examination and recourse to the sacrament of confession
- which, was, in its turn, a necessary preliminary to participation in the eucharist of the mass – ideally on a daily basis
- a huge roster of saints, held up as models to emulate; the bar for holy living set extremely high

I grew up with this idea that being a faithful Christian should be *hard*, that you couldn't just stroll through life willy-nilly, expecting everything to go your way.

In the Catholic context of that understanding, my own image of the perfect Christian was Francis of Assisi – a rich young man who gives up everything to devote himself to a life of service and itinerance.

As a young pre-teen I fantasized about entering a monastery and living the life of sackcloth and ashes.

Mary-Lou will gladly tell you that that has translated into my approach to vacation time. You can't really say you've had a great vacation if there isn't some element of challenge to it. You've got to experience the pain of portaging a canoe to appreciate the solitude of a wilderness campsite.

If you want to stand on the summit of a mountain and revel in a 360 degree view of unobstructed awesomeness, you have to be willing to make the climb.

Yes, I suppose if you have enough money you can helicopter in, but I can't imagine that the thrill would come anywhere close to the thrill of getting there on your own steam.

Although, I admit that as I begin to make my way through my sixties, I'm being won over to the notion that portaging does, indeed, suck.

But the effort is what makes the journey possible.

And in the Christian life, I suppose the same is true : the effort is what makes the journey possible.

Jesus' doesn't offer us the possibility of helicoptering in. We don't have the option of paying somebody to live our life for us. If we want to stand on the summit of the mountain, we need to be prepared to make the climb.

And that means, I think, being prepared to count the cost in a very particular way.

I repeat that we don't have the option of helicoptering in, of paying someone else to live our life.

But we do have the option of reaching out to each other as we make the climb.

Sometimes that will mean reaching out for someone else's help as we hit a rough patch, and sometimes it will mean reaching out to someone else who is struggling under their own weight.

No one builds a tower on their own, and no king fights a battle by himself.

The last part of the passage from the Revised Standard Version translated "... giving up all your possessions ..." by "... renouncing all that you have ..."

It may be a bit of playing with semantics, but I think that translation is easier to accept.

It's certainly more nuanced, and easier to digest, than the bald call to give everything away.

The Christian faith would be an odd, and I believe, virtually extinct, patchwork of believers if that was the defining mark.

It would reflect the decline of the Shaker movement that practised celibacy and basically died out.

I don't say that to suggest that I think Jesus is misquoted by the New Revised Standard Version, I say it to try to get at the core of what is actually expected of us as Christians.

I don't remember very much of the specifics of whatever catechism classes I may have had as a child in Catholic schools, but at least one story stands out very clearly in my memory.

It was a parable of sorts; not a biblical parable, but a story of some children who were participating in a contest to grow and tend the best garden.

All of the children eagerly attacked the challenge. They carefully planted their flowers; watered their gardens faithfully; weeded conscientiously; did all they could to nourish, nurture, and protect their gardens, in the hopes of producing the most beautiful patch of all.

But one child approached the challenge a little differently than the others.

Again, I don't remember the precise details of the story, but this one child was every bit as conscientious as the others in terms of the amount of work invested in producing a beautiful garden.

He, or she, did everything that all the other children did, and desperately wanted to win. But every now and then the child would hear of a neighbour who had been taken to hospital, or would be invited to a birthday party, or would have a generous impulse to do something nice for someone in his or her family.

On each of these occasions, the child would struggle between the conflicting urges of desperately wanting to win the best garden contest, and wanting to offer something beautiful from the child's garden to those he, or she, loved.

So, on each of these occasions, the child would agonize, then decide to take “just a few” flowers from the garden to make a bouquet for the person they wanted to please.

All the other children scoffed, of course. “You're spoiling your garden! You'll never have the best garden if you keep cutting off your best flowers!”

The child didn't really have an answer to that, and could only reply “well, I'll do my best anyway”.

As the season progressed, all the gardens flourished, but in all the other gardens the flowers choked each other and competed for the nutrients in the soil, resulting in stunted and wilting plants. There was colour and variety, but the gardens were really just collections of crowded, immature and pale examples of the various flowers that had been planted.

Only in this child's garden was there room for the flowers to thrive and reach their full potential. Only in this child's garden was there space for all of the plants to fully mature and exhibit a robust and healthy beauty. And, of course, this child's garden won the contest.

It's a very simplistic and child-friendly picture, but it's one that's stayed with me all these years, and set the tone for how I understand this idea of giving up one's possessions.

I'm frankly embarrassed to admit that I'm sure I'm less generous today than I was as a younger believer.

When I was a student, for example, I was much more ready to give away what I had than I am now.

It was a way of putting my own trust in God : i.e. At that moment if another student was in more need than I was, then I would help out from what little I had, and I trusted that God would provide for me when the time came when I was in need.

And, by and large, I think I can say that that *is* how things have played out.

But, as I've gotten older; as I've struggled through my own rough patches I suppose I've

become a little more cautious with my possessions.

Some of that caution I believe to be legitimate.

When you get married and have children, for example, you have a responsibility to care for them. That responsibility brings with it a certain level of anxiety to make sure that you live within your means; that you plan for the future; that you provide, at the very least, the basic necessities of life.

I found it much easier to be generous and give things away when I was the only one affected by my decisions.

And while Mary-Lou and I have always lived within relatively modest means, we've also managed to accumulate quite a lot over the years.

I recited a long list of things that belong to us at the beginning of this meditation. I could have added the fact that we have a fridge full of food; we have internet access; we have magazines that come to the door; we have tenants : people who pay us to share the space that is our home.

By the standards of much of the world, we are rich young rulers.

Well, maybe not particularly young any more, but we *are* rich, and we have power.

What advice do you have for us as we struggle to know how best to use this wealth and this power, and all these possessions?