

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? ²⁹ For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

³¹ “Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? ³² If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. ³³ In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:25-33)

Are You Ready to Follow Jesus?

Kids are born hero worshippers. Sometimes, a small child will follow his dad or her mother or an older sibling around like a puppy dog. But they don't just go where their hero goes. They copy the way they talk and the way they act. Sometimes kids sound just like their parents. Not that the voices are the same, but the words they use and even the way they say them mimic those parents. And quite often, as kids get older, they get new heroes outside the family. Some, we parents approve of, like a teacher. Some, we might be less thrilled about. When our kids start to dress like their favorite hip hop artist or they want to drive four hours to Chicago to see them in concert, it might give us pause. When we discover how much of their attitudes are formed by whatever social media platform is cool this year, it might make us just a little worried. In the end, though, it isn't just kids that are born hero worshippers. People in general tend to adopt the attitudes of society at large. Sometimes really influential people are called “opinion makers” because they have the ability to influence the way large segments of our society think and talk and act. Well, the greatest opinion maker of all time was Jesus. Every Christian is influenced in the way we speak and act and think by him. But just like we parents sometimes push back on the influences that our children follow, there are lots of people who push back on us Christians following Jesus. In our gospel lesson for today, our Lord makes some very challenging statements. We might illustrate his point with the question, “**Are you ready to follow Jesus?**”

I.

Most of you are probably thinking “yes,” right? That's why we're here! We could be sleeping in or drinking coffee and reading the Sunday paper. But we're here. That is absolutely a sign of following Jesus. But the Lord wants us to understand just how all-consuming following him has to be, so he says something so radical that it rattles the modern American mind. **Are you ready to follow Jesus? Do you hate everyone else?**

That's a stunning question, isn't it? We live in a country where hate speech can get you thrown in jail. But before we get too far off the topic, hear again what Jesus actually said: **“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.”** Jesus didn't use race or sex or lifestyle in his illustration. He used family. For us conservative Christians, that might be even harder to hear. Most of us consider our families to be the most important people on earth. We work so that we can make a good lifestyle for them. We sacrifice and operate a Lutheran elementary school here at Peace and a Lutheran high school at HVL because we want our children to benefit from those institutions. We promise our spouses that we will love them for as long we both shall live. We love the siblings we grew up with. We consider honor and respect for our parents to be more than just a good thing. It's a requirement. But Jesus says that you cannot be his disciple unless you hate your wife and children, your siblings and your parents. He can't mean that, can he?

Yes. He does mean it, although not quite in the sense that comes to us first. The Bible is clear: **Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.** Jesus is not denying the clear word of Scripture. If you truly hate your children or spouse or siblings or parents, you are guilty of real sin. So, what does Jesus mean? Believe it or not, he's actually talking about love. He's talking about loving God so much that we put him ahead of all people in our lives. You might think of it this way: I

love my wife. There is no room in my heart for any other woman. I cannot love another woman and still love my wife as I do today. So, if the choice is loving you or hating you ladies, and your name isn't Becky, then I'm sorry, I have to hate you because she comes first.

That's what Jesus is telling us about God. Love him first. Love him in a way that you can love no other. Love him and let his word take your every thought captive. Love him and let him change what you want out of life. Love him and model your whole life on his words – which does, by the way, mean that you will treat all people with self-sacrificing love. And if you don't love Jesus that way, you're an idol worshipper. Even if you put your spouse or your kids or your parents ahead of God, you're sinning, because he is supposed to come first.

You know what? Even when we take the word "hate" out of the equation, this is really hard to accept. We love our spouses. We love our children. We can reach out and touch them – or when we can't anymore, we have memories of all they meant to us. But we can't see God or hold him in our arms and feel his warmth against our chest, so it's hard for us to elevate our love for him above our family members. And when he takes those people from us or when he allows them to suffer or when they demand that we choose between God and them, it can be very difficult for us to put God first.

Don't we all have to admit that we love our children or spouse or siblings or parents more than God sometimes? I do. I can see that in the way my faith has struggled over the last several weeks. But even before, it was always too easy to put people in my life ahead of God or to avoid hard things that God would have me say to them because I didn't want to fight with them. That's idol worship. It's putting those people in God's place. For that sin, I deserve God's punishment in hell forever. Are you as guilty as I am? Obviously, I can't look into your heart. But I would be surprised if any of us could honestly say they we're not guilty of this sin. So that hell verdict is yours just as much as it is mine.

The only way out of hell is through the very Jesus who spoke these words to us. The same Jesus who says that we can't be his disciples, unless we love him so much that it seems like we hate everyone else, knows how impossible that is for the sinful human heart. So, he came and he loved in our place. He loved his Father perfectly and without fail in our place. He put his Father's will first in every breath he took and every word he spoke and every action he did. So, he loved us, because that's what his Father commanded. And his love makes us perfect in God's sight. His love went to the cross and paid the ultimate price that every one of us owes. His love washed all our sins away. His love burst the tomb open and he came out. And God now calls us his perfect children. And he recreated us so that we do want to follow Jesus. We do learn to speak like him and act like him and think like him. That is the gift God gave us. Love God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – above all else. Your faith gives you the power to do that.

II.

A disciple is a follower. The Greeks tended to use the word to mean someone who learned from a teacher. But the Jews saw a disciple as someone who had much more than just knowledge. For them, a disciple was a doer. It was someone who studied God's law in order to live according to that law. Jesus was a Jewish rabbi and he was using the word here in that sense. In the rest of our reading for today, he talks about what it costs to follow him. And he asks us if we're ready to pay that cost. My friends, **are you ready to follow Jesus? Are you willing to bear the cross?**

That's the cost. Jesus said, "**And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.**" The cross is pain. It might be physical pain, like you would experience if you had surgery or chemotherapy. But it doesn't have to be. The loneliness of the young Christian who aches for a friend can be the cross. The sadness that a family like mine has experienced in our loss is the cross. The disappointments that we Christians feel when our best efforts fail is the cross. Persecution is the cross. Do you see what all these things have in common? All those hurts touch believers. They all drive us to ask what God is doing and they force us to cling to him because he alone is able to heal us. And they do it, even when we can't see why he allows such hurts to come to us, even when his face is hidden from us in the storms and worries of this life. To be a Christian in this world is to carry the cross and follow Jesus. When he spoke these words, Jesus was on his way to pick up his cross and carry it to Calvary, and hang on it and die so that we will live. Now that we will live, he calls us to spend our brief life in this broken world carrying our cross behind him until we get to heaven. Are we ready to do that?

Jesus uses two pictures to get us to think about the cost of carrying the cross. He speaks of a man who wants to build a tower. But before he starts, he has to figure out if he has enough money to finish the job. If he starts and then runs out, he's going to look foolish. So, he won't start unless he's reasonably sure he can finish. The other picture Jesus uses is a king who's preparing to go to war. He knows his enemy's army is twice the size of his own. Unless he can devise a strategy to defeat that larger army, he's not going to march out to meet him. Long before he's in danger, he'll make whatever terms he has to in order to avoid the defeat. Do you see what Jesus is telling us? The Christian life will hurt. That will challenge our faith. We have to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. We have to remain faithful to our Lord when people we love die. We have to remain faithful to our Lord when pain wracks our bodies. We have to remain faithful to our Lord when we're lonely or afraid or defeated. Before any of those things happen, we need to count the cost so that we're ready.

That is the point. Jesus is not saying, "Hey, if being a Christian is too hard for you, you should get out now." He's saying, "Being a Christian will be too hard for you. You need to fortify your faith now so that when I lay the cross on your shoulders, you can follow me all the way to heaven." How do we do that? By doing what we're doing today. By hearing his word. By getting into the habit of going to the gospel for strength to continue. Then when the cross comes, that's what we will do. We'll go to Jesus. We'll go to our pastor. We'll go to our brothers and sisters in Christ and ask for their love and their prayers. We'll go to church and to communion to hear the good news about Jesus. And the Holy Spirit will work in all those things to strengthen our shoulders to carry that cross. That's actually why God sends it: to purify and strengthen our faith.

Now that doesn't mean that carrying our cross will be easy. Sometimes our cross feels so heavy that we can't imagine standing up under it, let alone carrying it. And when you have the cross on your shoulders, it feels like it's going to be there forever. It feels like you're never going to feel better. And under the cross, you can't help but see just how weak and frail you are – just how impossible it is to reach heaven on your own. So, you reach for the only support there is: Jesus and his love. Jesus and his promises. Jesus and his power in the word and the sacrament. And you get through. Now maybe you'll actually feel an influx of strength and power and hear the angels singing as you toss that cross up into the air. Maybe. But that's not what I've experienced personally nor seen in 26 years of ministering to others. We may not ever *feel* strong as we drag that cross toward heaven. But God is working in the gospel. The fact that we made it even one more step today is a miracle of his grace. And it's all he intended for us today. Be a follower of Jesus. Take up your cross and follow him. Prepare for the cross today and tomorrow, by hearing that gospel. And cling to Jesus when pain and sorrow come. He will bring you home. Amen.