

Twenty Third Sunday 2013C
The Cost of Discipleship
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In today's gospel, Jesus talks about people who begin what they cannot finish. One man starts to build a tower without calculating the cost. Another man goes to war without the resources to engage a more powerful enemy. Turning to the great crowds of people following him to Jerusalem, Jesus uses these examples to warn the crowds to consider what they are undertaking. Can they finish the journey they have begun with him? Do they understand the cost of being his disciple? Using the strongest possible language, he says that if they do not *hate* their father and mother, their wife and their children, their brothers and their sisters, even their own life, they cannot be his disciple.

What's going on here? What does this language mean? Is Jesus really telling us to hate those we love? Has he forgotten the fourth commandment: "You shall honor your father and your mother"? How can Jesus teach us to love God and neighbor and then speak about hating those closest and dearest to us?

What Jesus is saying requires some background if we are to understand his meaning. After all, he was speaking in another language, in another culture, two thousand years ago. And in that language and culture, the word "hate" could be used as a figure of speech for loving someone less than someone else. For example, in the prophet Malachi, God says, "I loved Jacob but I hated Esau," by which God means that while he loved Esau, but he loved Jacob even more.

Jesus uses this figure of speech to warn the crowds that while they love their family and friends, they must love him even more if they are to follow him in the way of discipleship. Jesus speaks in this way because he is on the way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified and put to death. And so he asks those who are following him, are you ready to leave your family behind to follow me? Are you willing to sacrifice your life to follow me? Are you willing to take up your cross and follow after me? If you are not, then do not follow me to Jerusalem, otherwise you will be like a man who

began to build what he could not complete, or like a king who went out to fight a foe he could not defeat.

Following Jesus today may not be so dramatic as it was when his disciples were following him to Jerusalem. Those disciples had to make a dramatic break with family and friends to follow Jesus. But there is always a cost to discipleship, a cost to following Jesus. There are times we must make hard decisions about what is right and wrong. There are times we must decide if we are going to agree with Christ or with the crowd. There are times we must decide to do what is right, even though everyone else is doing what is wrong. At those moments we must choose between the voice of Christ and the voice of the world about us.

For example, what is more important: what others think of us, or what is right? What is more important: listening to the voice of the crowd or listening to the voice of our conscience? What is more important: conforming ourselves to Christ or conforming ourselves to the current fashion of the day?

To follow Christ in the way of discipleship is costly because the way of discipleship passes through the valley of sacrifice. The way to life passes through the valley of death. This is why we must decide whom we love, whom we truly want to follow.