

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother,
wife and children,
brothers and sisters,
yes, and even life itself
cannot be my disciple.”

Well doesn't that just about cinch it?

Here we are about to start off our new program year,
welcoming everybody back after summer break,
and then Jesus goes and says something like this.

What are we to do?

People will be leaving in droves,
running down the aisles and out the back doors.

One thing I can say for Jesus;

He sure has an interesting evangelism program.

I thought about skipping it completely
and preaching on one of the other lessons,
you know, something lighter like,

“But if your heart turns away and you do not hear,
but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,
I declare to you today that you shall perish;”

But frankly, that didn't look any easier,

and the more I tried to avoid it
the more Jesus kept forcing his way back into my conscience.

I couldn't get away from him.

I kept wondering,

“Why would the God who so often tells us to love all,

even our enemies,

tell us to hate those in this world whom we often hold most dear,
our families?”

Well, this may sound like a ridiculous answer,

but the more I wrestled with it,

the more clearly I saw that the reason why,
is that God loves us.

I can hear some of you thinking,

“Well duh, He always says that!”

It sort of reminds me of the story where the preacher is giving a children’s sermon
and he has all the kids sitting up in the front of the church.

He starts by asking the children,

“What is it that climbs trees, eats nuts, and has a long bushy tail?”

There is a long moment of silence

and then one of the little children pipes up,

“Well, I know the answer is Jesus,
but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!”

If the answer is “Jesus loves us,”

why doesn’t it feel that way in this passage?

One of the things that I have found about the Bible,

is that it rarely gives up the truth quickly,
and rarely in one place at a time.

When it gets right down to it, there really isn’t much “plain truth” in the bible.

Much of the truth,

the deep truth,

that waits for us in scripture

only comes to us when we wrestle with it;

when we wait patiently with it;

when we let it grow within us.

So, if that's the way it works,

what might the truth be, that is waiting for us
behind these apparently harsh words.

Well, let's look a little closer.

There is a wonderful little book by Richard L. Foster

called "Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation."

In it Foster commends us to read scripture in three ways.

He says, read expectantly – expecting to find God in the pages.

AND he says read attentively – pay attention to the details
and put all of yourself into the task.

AND he says read humbly – don't assume you know anything
and be prepared to be surprised.

Did you notice how this story starts out?

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus."

The jokester in me first thought that this narrative

is just about Jesus thinning the herd
to cut down on his overhead.

After all,

One can't really be expected to feed five thousand people
with only five loaves and two fish every single day!

But as I spent more time with this passage,

and was able to set my preconceptions aside,
to read humbly,

I began to see that in actuality,
the reality was not all that different.

I really do think Jesus is thinning the herd, so to speak,

but it isn't to reduce the overhead.

It's about cost.

The cost of discipleship.

In these apparently harsh statements,

Jesus is actually letting his followers know what they are getting into.

And he is doing it while they still have a chance to get out.

When you go to buy a house,

one of the seemingly four billion forms that you have to sign at the closing
is something called a truth in lending form.

The first time I saw that form,

when Beverly and I bought our first house almost thirty-five years ago,
I almost had a heart attack.

Our little 2.5 bedroom ranch and a half

was going to cost us close to a quarter of a million dollars
over the next thirty years.

For a pharmacist just out of school, that was a lot of cabbage.

It took my breath away.

Almost literally.

To look at the entire cost of buying a house over thirty years

in one big chunk like that

was, to say the least, an eye opening experience.

What Jesus gives in this mornings Gospel

to the large crowd that has been following him around
is just such an eye opening experience.

They're getting the "Truth in discipleship" talk.

Jesus wants every one of them to know

just exactly what they are getting into.

As we gather this morning,

we too are a large crowd who are following Jesus
and so we too need to hear the talk.

As we come out of the near hibernation of COVID

and begin to explore new ways to share our spiritual gifts,

and new ways to respond to the gentle urgings of the Spirit,
we need to remember that through this work,
we too are made new.

As we grow in the Spirit we will change, like all growing things.

Still, the truth is, not all of us are disciples;

not all of us are called to the ministry of discipleship.

Not all of us have that spiritual gift.

Some are just followers, but that's ok.

Make no mistake about it, we need lots of followers too.

The truth is, discipleship is a costly ministry.

And it is a rare ministry as well.

Not to worry though,

for disciples are like the yeast in dough –

just a few disciples in a group of followers

will raise the whole group.

That being said,

discipleship is a ministry that we all,

even we mere followers,

aspire to.

And that is all to the good,

because while I said Jesus was talking to us about costs,

He was also talking to us about priorities.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

There is a more subtle truth here as well,

that when you finally see it

It will look about as subtle as a two by four to the forehead.

How hard do you really think it is to give up,

indeed to spurn,

something as concrete as love of family

for something as ephemeral as discipleship.

Well,

as I reflect on it,

it would seem to me, to be so hard as to actually be impossible.

Impossible, that is, without God's grace.

It is God's grace alone that allows us to even aspire to be a disciple.

And so, the subtle truth is that

if we can find the courage to be open to God's grace working in us,

the road to discipleship will open before us.

In the business world, the "gurus of excellence" will tell you

that in order to be excellent in one thing

you will need to give up something, and maybe even two things

that you are good in.

Excellence demands more from us than goodness.

It is no different in the world of the church.

If we are to aspire to discipleship,

the question that we should be asking ourselves constantly is,

"What is it that I hang on to,

indeed cannot let go of,

that is keeping me from experiencing

the full richness of God's grace?"

Is it the connections of my family?

Is it the compelling nature of my work?

Is it the distractions of my playtime?

It could be any of them.

All of these are gifts from God

and all are given to us for our support and refreshment in this world

and they are good.

They are good that is,

right up to that point where they begin to get in the way;

Where they start to come between us and God;

Where they become a hindrance to God's grace.

Then they become a threat to our very souls.

When we begin to rely on them instead of God,

they become mill stones around our neck,

dragging us down to the depths,

and we would do well to cut them free.

So, if we are to aspire to the high road of discipleship,

we must hold tenuously to all the gifts of this world, no matter how good.

“If you do not give up all your possessions,

none of you can become my disciple.”

Hey! No one ever said being a disciple was going to be easy?