

Oh Jesus. How vexing you are.

First you tell us to love our enemies. Now you tell us to hate our spouses and children. Then, you tell us to be careful in choosing to follow you.

THEN, you tell us to give everything away.

You are messing with our collective consciousness.

A little unpacking of this Gospel is necessary this morning.

Luke is trying to get across to us that in the context of his first-century community, as in ours, being a follower of Jesus is a bit more involved than people understand. It's one thing to hang out and listen to a cool preacher. It's another to put your entire life into his hands. There's a lot of stuff you can't take along for this ride with Jesus. Luke wants us to know it.

So, let's look at three words: "hate," "choose," and "surrender."

"Hate"

We hear that word a lot these days. In our context it is the opposite of love. It's an emotionally charged word, usually paired with 'angry' and/or 'violence'. That was not true in the world of Luke.

To say you hated something or someone meant that you liked them less than the object of comparison. Therefore, you could say that you love child number one and hate child number two and everyone would understand that you love child number two, you just love them a little less than number one. It worked with wives too. Jacob loved Rachel. Jacob hated Leah. Well, he loved Leah, but not as much as Rachel. See how it works?

Jesus uses the language in the context of his peers. Because you Love God, it's a no brainer to hate your spouse and children. You still love them, just not as much as you are supposed to love God. And, that brings us to word number two.

“Choose”

This part of Luke's gospel takes place as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem for the final time. The crowd around him grows thanks to his preaching and healing. Of course, they want to stay with him. He's the 'in' thing. He's popular. He's the chosen one to tear down the Roman rule.

Au contraire, says Jesus, in the equivalent Aramaic. Before you commit to a life following Jesus, you must consider the costs. Discipleship is not cheap.

Discipleship is not easy.

To be disciples means we choose Christ over earthly things. Our relationship with God in Christ must take priority over family, job, material goods – everything. You must love God and hate your mother and father and sister and brother and on and on and on. Now, remember what ‘hate’ means. Jesus said he had come down to bring a sword over peace. It’s not that he wanted war, he just knew what true discipleship was going to do to people. Division. Heartache. Devastation.

We should keep in mind the story Perpetua. She belonged to a wealthy family who held Roman citizenship. She was married and had a child. She was also the apple of her father’s eye. Her father had all the hopes for her that an aristocratic Roman male would have, including his being taken care of in his old age. At some point, Perpetua heard about the miraculous man from Galilee, who rose from the dead and transformed the people with whom he lived. She chose Jesus.

After her baptism, she was arrested along with her servant Felicity and others and imprisoned. Perpetua's child went with her into prison. Grieved, her father begged her over and over to recant her choice and return to the normalcy of Rome before the worst happened. She did not recant.

Perpetua gave her father and other relatives the charge of raising her child. She and her companions were martyred at sword point, after being scourged by wild beasts and beaten, as a birthday present for the emperor. When we think about choosing Jesus over the other distractions in our lives, we should be thankful that Perpetua's choice shall not likely be ours.

However, we will have to choose. We will have to surrender.

Perpetua surrendered her family, including her child. She trusted Jesus with everything. What will we have to surrender to be a disciple?

Convenience, first of all. Sending Philemon back to Onesimus meant Paul would no longer have someone to help him in his work. Receiving Philemon from Paul meant Onesimus would need to surrender his belief that he was somehow “better than his former slave” in God’s eyes.

It’s not convenient to carve out time in your day to pray for yourself or others. It’s not convenient to set aside the only morning you can sleep in order to engage with Christian peers for worship and fellowship. It’s not convenient to choose church activities over social ones, because social ones help you find the happiness that Madison Avenue makes you think you need.

Second, we must surrender fear. We cannot be afraid of being laughed at or not believed by those with whom we live each day. Even if it’s our own family. Even if it costs us a friendship or two. We must choose trust in God over fear.

Other surrendering comes to mind: material goods, desire for perfection, need for success or status. You know, the markers of what makes one elite and favored.

None of these markers matter to Jesus and, what's worse, they make it less possible to fully embrace discipleship.

The wealthy Perpetua and the servant Felicity were martyred equally. Eventually, Rome fell, and those who had everything suddenly had nothing. Those who had chosen Jesus, and embraced the story of his conquering death forever, they had hope. It was that hope that got them through every day. We need that hope as well, because life guarantees that at some point we will be weeping by our own waters of Babylon.

Discipleship hasn't much to offer except that hope. But, to someone who has just survived a hurricane, or an economic disaster, or a disastrous diagnosis, hope is everything. Hope is worth loving God a little more than your family. Hope is worth choosing to make God in Christ a priority in your life.

Hope is worth the cost of discipleship.