

A Difficult Road

Jeremiah 18:1-11 Luke 14:25-33

***Preached by Richard Bolin at Culver-Palms United Methodist Church
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Jesus was traveling on a difficult road. A great multitude was following. Did they know what it meant to follow Jesus? Jesus did not want anyone to have illusions. He believed in full disclosure. Thus he spelled out clearly before them what we might refer to as "Jesus' Truth in Discipleship Clause."

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate one's own father and mother and spouse and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even one's own life, that person cannot be my disciple."

I wish Jesus hadn't said that!

I mean here it is, back-to-school time, and for some folks, back-to-church time as well. And in the appointed scripture lesson for the day Jesus greets us at the door with the most extreme saying about Christian discipleship.

Was Jesus rejecting the 10 commandments? "Honor your father and mother," said Moses, and now Jesus says to hate them? Is Jesus contradicting himself? "Love your neighbor as yourself," he said, and now he says, "hate even your own life."

I also have a bone to pick with the NRSV translation. "Hate" is not a very good rendering of the Greek word *miseo*. *Miseo* does not carry the emotional animosity we would associate with "hate". Instead it means that these things must be second in priority.

So we read in Eugene Peterson's translation: "Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters – yes, even one's own self! – can't be my disciple. Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple."

Is that a lot better? Well, maybe.

Jesus stands, looking at the multitude following him on the way, and explains clearly what they are getting into. What happened next? Did a lot of them decide to go home? Well, by the time he got all the way to where he was going, when he hung on a cross - the multitude had disappeared. But that was not the end of the story. Finally, multitudes did follow Jesus, even on this difficult road, and multitudes still follow Jesus.

Discipleship often happens with one step back and two steps forward. On the cross we witness the extremity of God's love. In the resurrection we experience the power of God's love. And multitudes do follow Jesus. Many discover that discipleship costs them everything he said it would - being disowned by their families, losing their possessions, martyrdom. Yet these followers are not fools. They follow because they see in Jesus a window to the ultimate source of life.

Yes, it is a difficult road. It is about priorities. Jesus says you cannot put any other interest above your commitment to follow the way. What is this way? It is the way of the kingdom. To follow Jesus is to make God's vision for the world our Number One priority.

Living the way of the kingdom means:

- seeking the good of all: all of God's children, all of God's creation;
- being a loving person at all times and places;
- sharing the pain of those who suffer;
- empowering those who are weak;
- standing firm for the truth in the midst of a sea of falsehoods.

This is the way of Jesus. You have gone down this road, haven't you? I have seen you there, doing all those things. It is, at times, a difficult road. Is there any other path worth choosing?

Our denomination has launched another cable television advertising campaign inviting people to attend a United Methodist Church near them where they will hopefully find people with "Open hearts, open minds and open doors."

Did anyone see one of those advertising spots on cable TV and decide to come to church today looking for open hearts, minds and doors ... only to be greeted, as I noted before, by the words of Jesus telling us that following him means leaving everything and everyone behind? Don't be frightened away. The way of Jesus is a difficult road ... and it is a wonderful road.

Does one find open hearts, open minds and open doors here? Yes, indeed, if we are following Jesus. Let us consider for a moment just the first phrase of that slogan.

The way of Jesus is the way of the open heart.

The open-heart road is a difficult road... and it is a wonderful road.

The open heart is a compassionate heart. Margaret Mead, probably the most noted sociologist of the last century, was asked what the first signs of civilization were in a society. The questioner expected her to talk about such things as different tools found in archeological digs. But Mead said the first sign of emerging civilization was a healed femur. In early society, if a person could not hunt or gather, a broken leg would mean his/her death. A healed femur meant that someone had to care for the injured person, not just the leg, but by bringing the person food and taking time away from their other activities to care for the person. Compassion, Mead said, was the first sign of civilization.

The ancient nomad traveled, no doubt, many difficult roads. But one road was made more difficult by his or her choice to carry another who could not walk. One day Jesus would carry the cross, which, in a sense, is the same as carrying all of broken humanity on his back. The beginning of civilization is compassion. The coming of the kingdom of God is following the way of Jesus.

Open hearts are molded hearts – hearts held in the hands of God and shaped into a closer likeness of God. Jeremiah announced that one day God would give the people new hearts. He saw the futility of forcing people to comply to an external definition of righteousness. Inner transformation is lasting transformation. So this hands-on God, whom Genesis pictures as molding human beings out of the clay of the earth, will mold us once again – like the potter who repeatedly reworks a lump of clay until it becomes a thing of beauty.

The way of Jesus is the kingdom way. It is a difficult but wonderful road. If we will open our hearts, God will touch us, mold us, change us, inspire us to follow this more excellent way.

We are a bit shocked this morning to hear Jesus call into question our obligation to parents, saying that following him means leaving family behind. I dare say that the people following Jesus were more shocked. In the ancient near eastern world obedience to parents was on a par with obedience with God, and that is just the issue that wants to address. Jesus is in fact bringing his followers back to a proper interpretation of the 10 commandments. The 10 Commandments can easily be split into two parts. The beginning of the list is about our relationship with God (you shall have no other gods, make no idols, be careful with God's name, keep the Sabbath). The end of the list has to do with human relationships (do not kill, steal, bear false witness, commit adultery, covet your neighbors things). Right in the middle is the commandment to honor ones father and mother. It goes with the second half of the list, not the first half. Honor your father and mother, but know that they are not God. In the strict patriarchy of Jesus' day, that was sometimes a difficult distinction to make.

But these days I believe we have the opposite problem. We are more likely to make ourselves into gods, and to treat our elders with disrespect. Change our hearts, O God, that we might have compassion for all!

In the Valley of Slievenamon in the north of Ireland a young man and his father lived alone on a small farm. They were simple and hard working folk living a harmonious life, even after the son married a lass from the village and brought her home to the farm. But after their first child was born dissension came to the household. It was not the wife or the elderly father that changed, but the young husband, who, suddenly feeling the responsibility of fatherhood, became sour and gruff. And it was his own father that became the object of his grumbling and complaining.

"Will you stop snuffling when yer atin' at table, do you think yer at a trough?" "Stop spitting in the fire, you'll teach the child bad manners." "Yer getting too old for the yard work, you move like a snail." On and on he would go. And through it all, the poor old father said nothing, trying to keep out of his son's way.

Finally, one night the son says, "Father, there's nothin' else for you, the house is getting too small for us all, there's food only for us. It's to the poorhouse ye'll go tomorrow." His wife tried to speak on her father-in-law's behalf, but her husband would hear none of it.

So the next morning he says to his wife, "Mary, get down that blanket that you brought with you for your dowry and we'll give it to Dad to take with him."

Now in those days blankets were woven very long so they would fold over double on the bed. When the husband saw how fine and long this blanket was, he had second thoughts about giving it up. "It's too good a blanket for him to be taking to the poorhouse now. Cut it in half," he ordered.

His wife objected strongly at this final insult. "I will do no such thing," she said. "I brought this blanket into the marriage, and your father has been nothing but kind to me. I'll give him no less than the whole blanket."

And that might have been the end of the conversation, as her husband seemed to relent with a nod to this small act of charity. But then their wee lad of a boy spoke up. "Daddy, do no such thing! The half blanket will be enough. But Mommy, be sure you put away the other half in a safe place, so that when I'm sending my daddy to the poorhouse, I'll know where it is."

And those words dropped like a ton of bricks in the little farmhouse. That young husband paused with the look of a new realization on his face. His whole outlook on the situation was immediately changed. “Father, just sit by the fire and make yourself comfy. Mary, put that blanket back in the top cupboard, and let’s all have a cup of tea.” And from that day to this, the old man and the wee family lived together in peace and contentment, and the word “poorhouse” was never uttered again in the Valley of Slievenamon.ⁱ

An open heart is the first step on an amazing journey with Jesus. Because God has touched our hearts, we have compassion for one another. God would open our hearts, warm our hearts and expand our hearts until they have the capacity to take in the world. Lord God, help us grow. Amen.

ⁱ Based on the Irish folktale, “The Half Blanket” as told by Maggie Kerr Pierce