

Discipleship Has a Cost

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Being a disciple of Jesus is a sweet deal. We have it *made* as Jesus' followers. Think about it- as a part of Jesus' entourage, we get to hang out where Jesus does all that cool healing work. We have front row seats when he spits into the dirt and grosses out the crowd by putting the saliva-dirt mud on the eyes of the blind man – and then we get to share in the glory as people realize that Jesus worked a miracle- he restores sight to the blind. Following Jesus around means we get invited to the most interesting of dinner parties- we have delicious bread and olives and wine in the homes of the rich, and what's so interesting about the dinner conversation is that total outsiders are brought in off the street. Dinner conversation has never been so lively since we started eating with tax collectors and other notorious sinners! It is so cool to be a part of that.

And as a part of his inner circle entourage, we disciple types are up close for those all important teaching moments. We get to ask questions and speak intimately with Jesus. I love being a disciple – I love the nearness to the healing, the teaching, being cared for by Jesus. Which makes it a little stressful to hear today's Gospel. Jesus makes it crystal clear that following him has a cost. Discipleship has a cost. It's not all about healing and miracles and getting your feet washed by the teacher. Today we are called to face the hard truth: Discipleship- following Jesus- involves both promise and cost.

In yesterday's Washington Post¹, I read an interesting article that illustrates how commitment to just about anything involves both promise and cost. Allow me to summarize: For 11 long years, cousins Abdul and Ahmad have been feuding over the height of a wall between their wheat farms. Their dispute over this wall has even resulted in violence- family members in both households have been injured. To find resolution in the court system required an arduous journey that was expensive and kept them traveling instead of farming. All of that has changed for these two cousins in the rural Mewat district in the northern region of India.

India has launched its first mobile court- an air conditioned bus that travels to far-flung villages. It comes with a judge, and a judicial entourage of 12, including a stenographer and a floor sweeper. The bus has a judge's chamber and space for proceedings. What a great innovation to serve the people and have a more peaceful and just society! But it is a work in progress. Within the first hour of its operation, they moved proceedings outside. The local folks felt too cold and even nauseas in the air-conditioning. They were afraid they'd catch a chill and preferred to have the court proceedings happen outside in the open, even on a humid afternoon. So there under the shade of a tree, justice was worked out for cousins Abdul and Ahmad. The judge and the village chief brokered a peaceful settlement. This innovative traveling court offers much promise to people in remote places who seek to resolve their conflicts. But not everyone is happy with the new court.

One of the attorneys in the 12 person entourage complained of the long distance he traveled and the inconvenience of practicing law under trees in the dreadful heat. He grumbled about the local drinking water – it's muddy. There aren't enough tables or chairs or typists. There's no copy machine, and worst of all- there's no bathroom. An anonymous official in the judicial system said that people in the court have asked him to ensure that the mobile court fails. They would rather it fail than be assigned the mobile court duty next.

The commitment to bringing justice to remote areas involves promise and it involves cost. Even the promise of doing something innovative and peace-making is met with resistance by those in power because it is a pain. It is a real pain to travel all that way, to drink muddy water, to work without a copy machine. It's so typical of us humans- we are all excited about the promise and

¹ *Washington Post*, August 18, 2007, "World News" section, page A9

possibility, but when the going gets tough and we don't have proper bathroom facilities- we secretly hope the whole thing fails so we can get out of our commitment. This situation sure speaks to me today as a disciple of Jesus! Maybe that's because in our Gospel today, Jesus is offering fair warning about the cost of following him. The disciples know the promise part- they have witnessed first hand his healing and bread-breaking and acts of mercy and love. Now Jesus clarifies that bearing the kingdom values of a disciple will also have a cost.

Commitment to the way of life Jesus teaches, to the kingdom vision Jesus shares, may bring persecution. As a disciple of Jesus, you may take a stand on an issue because you believe in honoring the presence of the risen Christ in every human being. You may take a stand and pay the cost for it. The cost of discipleship becomes apparent when we commit to new kingdom values. Kingdom values affect everything we do- everything we do offers us an opportunity to live into the kingdom of God as we are called to as disciples of Jesus. Some actions are more benign than others, for sure. But when we find ourselves making decisions, we are wise to consider what it means to be a disciple as we ponder the options. We are wise to pay attention to the values Jesus taught us, even when deciding in a kingdom-ward direction means there is going to be a cost for us. We need to know what those kingdom values are if we are going to live by them as disciples.

Four values come quickly to mind when I survey the life of Jesus:

1. Honoring God,
2. Offering healing and wholeness,
3. Sharing food with anyone who is hungry, and
4. Teaching and talking with people.

Jesus desires that as his disciples we honor God. That we worship and pray and give thanks and remember the one who created us and loves us. Jesus desires that as his beloved disciples, we live in ways that are whole and healthy, that we are fed and feed others in a context of fellowship. Jesus showed us by his own example that as his disciples we are to teach one another and stay in conversation together even when we disagree or seem too different to relate to one another. As Jesus lived these values to the point of death on a cross, so we are called as his disciples to make sacrifices, to be obedient, to pay the cost of being his disciples.

In "First Things First," Stephen Covey tells a story that one of his associates heard at a seminar. The seminar presenter pulled out a wide-mouth gallon jar and placed it next to a pile of fist-sized rocks. After filling the jar to the top with rocks, he asked, "*Is the jar full?*" The group replied, "*Yes.*" He then got some gravel from under the table and added it to the jar. The speaker jiggled the jar until the gravel filled the spaces between the rocks. Again, he asked, "*Is the jar full?*" This time, the group got a little wiser and replied, "*Probably not.*" The speaker then added some sand and asked, "*Is the jar full?*" "*No!*" shouted the group who was clearly on to the trick. Finally, the speaker filled the jar to the brim with water and asked the group the point of this illustration. Someone replied that you could always fit more things into your life if "*you really work at it.*" "*No,*" countered the speaker. The point is, if you don't put the big rocks in first, "*. . . would you ever have gotten any of them in?*"

As you make decisions as a disciple with kingdom values, ask: "*Is this a big rock?*" Does this honor God? Does this decision offer healing and wholeness? Ask yourself if the outcome of your decision will feed you, or feed others, if it will serve to teach you or create space for important conversations. Keep your kingdom values near as you make decisions about how to spend your time and money, or how to respond to a situation at home or work. Putting the big rocks in first, those values that Jesus taught us when he came to earth to live among us and transform creation, is our call as his disciples. It offers the promise of being a part of the kingdom, but it also involves a cost. That's the hard truth Jesus communicates to us today, and I believe that God has given each person gathered here the strength and courage to live as disciples- no matter the cost.