

Luke 14:25-33

**Mission Impossible?©
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Holy smokes! Listening to Jesus' talk about what it takes to be his disciple feels like *Mission Impossible*, doesn't it? It sounds like a contradiction to all the grace and forgiveness and second chance theology we so often hear and think of when we think of God; when we think of Jesus going to the cross for us.

Last week we heard Jesus talk about the blessings of those who had mercy and compassion on the poor, the lame, the blind. We heard about a reversal in living the Kingdom life.

Now Jesus gives us these hard, cold instructions about hating our fathers and mothers, our brothers and sisters. He tells us we too have to carry the cross and give away all our possessions. Who can possibly be a disciple of Jesus if this is what he requires?

Of course, we know of those exceptional people – people like Mother Teresa who today becomes a Saint.

I read in the September/October edition of *Alive Now* about a young Methodist minister named Lorenza Andrade-Smith who gave up all her possessions. She decided to take a leave of absence from her church and other ministerial duties, to renounce all of her possessions – her home, her car, her salary – so that she could live on the streets with the homeless for three years in order to understand the plight of those who had to live that way. Reverend Andrade-Smith said she did not see how she could be an advocate for the homeless unless she knew what it was to live the way they live.¹

I once read of a woman who had a great job as a Presbytery Executive, who took sabbatical, left her nice home to go live in an apartment in a less than nice neighborhood and went to work in a Waffle House, working alongside waitresses and cooks who were living on the edge, financially – barely making ends meet. She learned what life was like for those who have different struggles than she, and her heart and life was touched and blessed by those she worked with.

But, are we all supposed to do that? To be that radical? And if we did, who would have anything to give to the poor?

And going back to “hating” our fathers and mothers, our sisters and brothers ... aren't we commanded to honor our fathers and mothers? Isn't this a contradiction of what the Bible tells us in other places?

¹ Could I Give Away My Possessions? Amanda M. Bachus, *Alive Now*, Upper Room, Nashville, TN September/October, Discipleship edition, p. 12

There is a movie called *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. It's about a writer from New York City who goes to Savannah, Georgia to try and understand some of the people who live there. The film is set in 1980, yet a woman refers to the Civil War as "that recent unpleasantness." When an intruder fires a pistol at the ceiling and flashes around a jagged edged whiskey bottle at a fancy dinner, one of the guests describes the intruder as "a colorful character." The eccentric residents very smoothly practiced the art of understatement. They understood quite well exactly what they were talking about, but the outsider had no idea.

In Jesus' day, the opposite was true for many teachers. Instead of using understatements, they were masters of hyperbole, which is the opposite of understatement. "It is a bold exaggeration used for dramatic effect. If you are an outsider," writes commentator Mark Ralls, "and are unfamiliar with the linguistic rules of the game, it can be infuriating."² Hating your father and mother would be a figure of speech, meant to exaggerate for dramatic effect.

In other words, Jesus wants to emphasize just how important it is to put our commitment to him before everything else – including our families. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of costly grace. It is costly because it has cost people their lives. It is grace because it also gives life.

We know that there are many who did give their lives for the sake of the faith. One of those martyrs was a Russian Christian named Vladimir Ambartsumov. As a young man, he became a leader in the ecumenical Student Christian Movement with its concern for critical thinking about the faith, life and social responsibility in Christian community. He later became a priest in Moscow. Because of his faith and his work, he soon found himself running and hiding from state authorities. John Burgess wrote about this in his commentary on our passage today.

"In order to protect his wife and three children (Ambartsumov) rarely came home. He had to "hate" them in order to save them. Each day he literally took up the cross, secretly celebrating the liturgy, at the peril to his own life. When he was arrested in 1937, everything that he owned was confiscated, even the clothes on his back. For more than 50 years, the authorities insisted that he had died years later from a kidney infection. Only as the Soviet Union was collapsing did his family learn the truth. Ambartsumov had been summarily executed after he had refused to betray his faith or his family or friends."

In the year 2000, Ambartsumov's daughter lost her two children in a car accident. She would later call it her Golgatha (which is also the name of the place where Jesus was hung on the cross). Although she did not know how she was going to bear such a heavy cross, she found comfort in the memory and courage of her father's faith.

Burgess writes: "Few of us will experience martyrdom, but all of us will face a Golgatha, not knowing how we can make it to another day. The cost of discipleship will sometimes seem too

² Mark Ralls, *Feasting on the Gospels*, Luke, Volume 2, ©2014, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 75, 76

much. What sustains us is the faithful witness of Christ himself. We will not live up to his ways, but we can keep reminding each other of what he has already done for our salvation.”

Jesus did not allow family or friends to divert or distract him from his commitment to us. He carried the cross on which he would die. He was stripped bare of all possessions. He accepted the full cost of discipleship (of being our Savior) on our behalf.³

Sometimes our commitment to Christ is even for the protection and for the sake of our loved ones. Sometimes our commitment to follow means a separation from family who do not believe.

Sudha Khristmukti told the story of her grandparents in India who met Jesus through missionaries. Because they started attending church and socializing with Christians they not only became outcasts in their society but their families completely disowned them. They were shunned, hated and were threatened with physical abuse. But they stood firm in their faith and commitment to Christ. And because of that commitment, generations of their own offspring became Christians who had a strong faith and were able to withstand abuse. Later, those grandparents became the first Indian missionaries to go to Africa. They had changed their name when they became Christians to Khristmukti. Khrist – in native Gujarati language means “Christ.” Mukti means “freedom.” “The freedom that is in Christ.”⁴

We are all called to follow Jesus, which means we are called to be his disciples in the world. Our calls look different, however. Some of us are called to a more difficult journey than others. But one thing is the same: we are called to total commitment to Christ. We cannot know ahead of time where our journey of faith will lead us. We do not know if there will be day when our very lives will be on the line. Will we be asked to deny our faith or die? Will we find ourselves being shunned and outcast from society and even family? Our path is a mystery path that we trust Jesus walks with us on.

Cherie Burbach wrote this poem, titled *Mystery Path*⁵:

I asked you for the path,
the one that would feel good on my feet,
the one where I wouldn't lose my way,
where I could move quickly,
making the kind of progress
that made the world nod it's head in approval.

³ John P. Burgess, *Feasting on the Gospels*, Luke, Volume 2, ©2014, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, p. 77, 78

⁴ Sudha Khristmukti, *Alive Now*, Upper Room, Nashville, TN September/October, Discipleship edition, p. 32

⁵ Cherie Burbach, et al, p. 39

Sometimes, if I centered myself in stillness,
I could hear you whispering,
This way ...

Other times,
I noticed warning signs tacked up before me
on tiny pieces of paper
that blended in with the trees along the way.

But I'd shout out to you,
Can't you give me the map that shows it all,
every turn and road and path,
along the terrain of my life?

And you smiled,
saying no, of course not,
that you'd miss me too much that way.

Is your commitment to follow Jesus strong enough to give everything else up, regardless of where your path might lead, or what you might face, trusting completely that wherever you go, there he is too – always beside you; always there to guide and strengthen you; knowing that as we commit to him, his commitment to us is even stronger.

Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." (John 14:18)

"Nothing can separate us from the love of God." Paul says. (Romans 8:38-39)

James Dillet Freeman, wrote – and I close with this thought:

"The light of God surrounds me;
The love of God enfolds me;
The power of God protects me;
The presence of God watches over me.
Wherever I am, God is!"