

## The Cost of Discipleship

Today's passage from Jeremiah comes from a time when the kings of Israel were caught up in conflict among regional powers. Assyria is in decline, Babylon is in ascension; it is a time of shifting alliances. The future of Israel is at risk; it hangs in the balance of these competing alliances. As its kings played first to one power, then to another, Jeremiah says they have forgotten the covenant. He says regaining faithfulness to the covenant will show them a way through the political dilemmas facing Israel. This is the context of today's passage about the potter and the clay.

Through this image, Jeremiah is saying: If the rulers of Israel keep in the way of the covenant, they will choose wisely, and God will re-make their future. God can change his mind.

But in the very next verse after today's passage, the text has Jeremiah's opponents saying, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and act according to the stubbornness of our evil will."

Not only that, but they also plot against Jeremiah himself, seeking to take his life. Because he dared to ask, 'What about God, and what God wants?' Because he took a firm, uncompromising stand.

Please keep in mind Jeremiah's courage, while I change gears and look at the Gospel.

A tough Gospel. We are supposed to hate our families, it says. We are supposed to give up all our possessions.

If these positions were to have been taken literally, Christianity would never have taken root. Since the times of the earliest church, even from Jesus' own time, Christians have lived with their families, and have had possessions. We know this from the Biblical record itself.

So let's consider what Jesus was really trying to say. 'Hate,' here, does not refer to anger or hostility. Back then, the word 'hate' was less about emotion, and more about honor. Hating one's family, meant doing something that disgraced them. Like, by taking up with an itinerant preacher. Jesus is saying, *if there is a conflict*, the demands of discipleship must take precedence over one's family ties.

In the parables Jesus offers, about estimating the cost of building a tower, and a king calculating the relative power of his forces, Jesus is saying that each person who would be a disciple, needs to consider in advance what this commitment requires. What will following Jesus, demand of me? When choices have to be made. It's that simple, and that profound.

When Jesus then goes on to say we have to give up all our possessions, the word translated as 'give up' actually means 'say farewell to.' Meaning, say farewell to a thing or person, in preparation for departing on a journey. Say farewell to a competing claim, upon you. Which is interesting.

So perhaps these sayings of Jesus – about families and possessions, about calculating costs – do hang together, and do make some sense. You know, if you read the Bible itself, it is broken into paragraphs that have headings. These paragraph headings are not in the original text, but rather, are the work of the translators; it's their interpretation of what the following paragraph is about. The heading for today's passage, in the Bible, is "The Cost of Discipleship."

Which brings to mind a book from more recent times, entitled, "The Cost of Discipleship." It was written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor in Germany in the 1930's, when Hitler and the Nazis were coming to power. The Nazis tried to co-opt the Christian religion; they held that the law of God was embodied in Hitler. There were a few who kept the true faith alive, in opposition to Hitler, and the most famous among these was Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

He, along with a few others, signed a declaration opposing what the Nazis were doing, and tried to set up an alternative, true church. As a consequence, he was removed by the Nazis from a position he had as lecturer, and he was banned from Berlin. Once the war started, he was forbidden to preach, to publish, and even to convene groups for discussion. In 1942 he tried to mediate between Germans who were opposed to Hitler, and the British government.

Bonhoeffer was arrested in 1943. Although he was opposed to the use of violence, he had become convinced that Hitler had to be stopped by any means necessary, so he took part in the conspiracy that culminated with the failed attempt on Hitler's life in 1944. He was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp, and was hanged by the Gestapo on April 9, 1945. Among his famous writings, including books he wrote from prison, was The Cost of Discipleship. In this book, Bonhoeffer addresses some of the same subjects Jesus does, in today's Gospel.

For example, with regard to our kinship with father and mother, brothers and sisters, and in married love, he says that direct relationships are impossible. He says that Christ is always there, between us; that we can only get in touch with those close to us, through Christ.

With regard to the commitment discipleship requires, Bonhoeffer says when we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an *exclusive attachment* to his person. He says that Christians are strangers and aliens in a foreign land, only passing through.

With regard to possessions, he says, "What are we really devoted to? That is the question. Are our hearts set on earthly goods? Do we try to combine devotion to them with loyalty to Christ? Or are we devoted exclusively to him?"

These are uncompromising positions. They surely helped center him, when he was faced with life-and-death choices in Nazi Germany. When he felt called to speak out and take action against them.

As did Jeremiah, in his time. And they both faced death, as a consequence.

**When** do people like Bonhoeffer and Jeremiah, come to the fore? When do we hear from uncompromising people like these?

When there is a Hitler, massacring millions. When the Babylonians are at the gates.

What about, in less dramatic times? Where are the Bonhoeffers then; the Jeremiahs?

Perhaps these people existed, these prophets serving God in extreme circumstances, so we might take courage from their example. And say words that need to be said, *in* less dramatic times. Not that we need to take uncompromising positions as they did; but rather, take inspiration from them. Take enough heart from them; enough courage.

So that even in our less-dramatic times, we can “say something if we see something” – to take a phrase from Homeland Security. If we see something or hear something that calls itself to our attention, because we are followers of Christ. We recognize a cost, an obligation, that comes with this.

For example, when we hear talk, in the political area, that sounds to us like real hatred, that caters to fear and exclusion ...

... which can happen at any time, in any place ...

... we say something. Even if only, to our friends or neighbors; or with acquaintances, people we encounter.

We start with our own selves. When we hear talk that sounds like hatred and fear, we ask ourselves, “Can this be what God wants? For God’s world, for God’s children?” This may help us find words to use with others. Not uncompromising words. But rather, words that somehow inject, values we hold. Perhaps we might thereby, shift the climate a little.

To do things of this nature, might be one of those costs of discipleship.

Maybe this is why we are given, Bonhoeffers and Jeremiahs.

That we might have, some of their courage. Just some. In our time, in our place.