

Discipleship as Treachery

A sermon on Luke 14:25-33 & Philemon by Nathan Nettleton, 4 September 2016
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Message

The culture of God is so radical in its loving embrace of everyone that mainstream society will see it as a dangerous rejection of all it holds dear.

Sermon

We have recently endured a long election campaign, and we are now looking on from afar at a much longer one on the other side of the world. One of the unavoidable in election campaigns is all the inflated promises politicians make whenever they have a TV camera or a crowd in front of them. They always seem to be telling us that, if we will only vote for them, everyone will be gainfully employed and happy and prosperous and all will be well. It appears to be even more extreme in the USA. Donald Trump announced a few weeks ago that violent crime would end on the day he took office!

I don't know about you, but I don't think I've ever heard a politician say that if you follow me, things will probably go from bad to worse for you. Jesus would have been a crap politician. Completely unelectable. We'd have applauded his honesty, but we'd have never voted for him.

Did you hear what he said in tonight's gospel reading? And did you hear what prompted him to say it? Luke tells us that there were now large crowds following him around wherever he went. Every politician's dream, right? But what does Jesus do? He turns to them and delivers a speech that seems guaranteed to send him plunging in the opinion polls.

"If you get serious about following me, you will be seen as a traitor to your family. You'll be seen as hating your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters. Yes, you'll be seen as an enemy of life itself. Are you up for that? If you are serious about following me, you'll have to follow me in doing the things that are provoking people to persecute and execute me. If you're not up for that, you cannot be one of my followers. So weigh it up, and don't bother following me now if you haven't got what it takes to see it through to the bitter end. You can't follow me without giving up everything you have. Hello! Where did everyone go?!!"

(Section omitted from the preached version) Jesus doesn't seem terribly fond of big crowds, and perhaps he was right, given the way the crowd eventually turned on him. He seemed to recognise the tendency of crowds to suddenly get swept up in a mob mentality and do terrible evil. And certainly this is not the only time he seems more intent on deterring would-be followers than encouraging them.

Since we are such a small church, it is a bit tempting to latch on to that idea and preach a self-indulgent sermon suggesting that we are small because we are so faithful to Jesus's message of costly discipleship, but that would be self-delusional.

Assuming that Jesus wasn't just having a bad day and trying to get everyone to leave him alone, why does he lay it on so thick with the crowds that many of them doubtless gave up on him? What does he mean when he talks about hating our families, putting ourselves on death row, and needing to give up everything we have? And most importantly, since we still own

things and since our lives mostly don't seem to be attracting great hostility, what is Jesus saying about us here? And in what way is this good news?

In the final verse, Jesus sums up what he has said with the line, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." This verse may not be quite as simple as it sounds. The Greek word that is translated as "possessions" in the version from which I just quoted (NRSV) is an unusual word for two reasons.

Firstly it is ambiguous whether it is a noun or a verb. It could mean either "all your possessions", or "all your possessing". In some ways the verb makes more sense because instead of leaving us all destitute, it becomes a challenge to the possessiveness that so often degenerates into rivalry and hostility and injustice. Secondly, the Greek word is derived from a root word that means "being", so it could also mean something like "give up all that you are" or "all that makes up your life." Which is probably helpful, not so much in giving us some wriggle room, but in making it clearer how it might be related to the earlier statements about giving up your life and being seen as turning your back on your family. Perhaps "releasing your possessive grip on all that is important to you" might get us closer to what Jesus meant.

In Australian culture, it is very common for us to say that the thing that is most important to us is family. So if Jesus is calling us to release our grip on what is most important to us, family is in the frame. And when accurately translated, his words here are extremely confronting. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Hate your family?!

What are we supposed to do with that? You could preach a ripper Father's Day sermon with it! Obviously a call to hate anyone seems wildly out of step with everything else Jesus teaches about God's call to love everyone, God, neighbours and enemies alike.

The most common explanation is that Jesus is using some extreme hyperbole here to suggest that we are to be so devoted to him that, by comparison, it will be as though we hate everything else. I don't think that is entirely wrong, but it is probably giving ourselves more wriggle room than is really justified. I've also heard it suggested that Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, has no word for "to prefer", so the only way of expressing a strong preference is to contrast love and hate. Two of the world's leading Aramaic scholars have an office next door to my house, but they are at a conference in South Africa this week, so I haven't been able to verify that. But even if it is true, I think we are dealing with more than mere preferences here.

Why? Because Jesus follows it up with his two illustrations of the need to count the cost and work out whether we've really got what it takes to be his followers, and a mere rearrangement of preferences doesn't tend to confront us with any significant cost. If I decide that I prefer pale ales to lagers, there is no real price to be paid. If I decide to give up beer altogether, that's going to hurt. There'd be a cost to be counted then.

It seems to me that to make sense of the idea that this really costs us, it must refer not so much to the shift in our own values, but to how that shift is interpreted and treated by others. So I think that what Jesus is saying is that if we get serious about walking in all his ways, we will be widely accused of hating or betraying our families, and betraying all that is held dear by our society.

Perhaps a good analogy is the way inter-racial marriage was regarded a few generations back. White people who married coloured people were regarded as race-traitors, as a disgrace to their families and their communities, and they were subjected to all manner of violent abuse and repercussions. If you chose to love and marry across the racial colour lines, you really had to count the cost because there was going to be hell to pay.

So how is choosing to follow Jesus like that? Tonight's reading from Paul's letter to Philemon may give us a clue, and it is not far from the inter-racial marriage illustration. Philemon had been converted to Christianity through Paul's preaching and pastoral guidance. He was also a wealthy man, and a slave owner.

It shocks us to imagine Christians being slave-owners, but in the world that Jesus and Paul inhabited, slavery was an absolutely taken for granted fact of life. Suggesting that well-off households do without slaves would have sounded as inconceivable as suggesting that our households should do without electricity or the internet.

Philemon had had a slave named Onesimus who had escaped and run away. The penalty for a slave who ran away was usually death. It might sometimes be reduced to some violent punishment like a flogging, but severe punishment was regarded as essential to maintaining the system.

But something weird had happened. After running away, Onesimus had also run into the Apostle Paul and had also been converted. So Paul is now taking the risk of sending Onesimus back to Philemon with a letter appealing to Philemon not only to forgo punishing Onesimus for going AWOL, but to accept Onesimus now, not as a returning slave, but as a brother in Christ. The fact that this request would be regarded as so extreme and outrageous as to be almost unthinkable is evident in the lengths Paul goes to to emotionally twist Philemon's arm about it. Paul knew that he was asking Philemon to set himself up to be ostracised as a race or class traitor and as one who was undermining the essential foundations of the society.

So, can you see how in that context, for Philemon to truly follow Jesus on the path of radical reconciliation, and to follow Paul's teaching of there being no slave or free in Christ, would mean significant risk of being denounced and shunned as one who was seen to be treacherously hating his own family and culture?

So where is it that we, in our day in this country, are called to follow Jesus in ways that will likely provoke similar denunciations and hostility? Let me suggest three pretty obvious examples.

The first would be radical hospitality to asylum seekers. Last week there was a story from the "Love Makes a Way" mob about their sit-in action in the Prime Minister's office. Looking down their Facebook page, I noticed that there were numerous comments from people questioning or denouncing their action. And one of the arguments that was being used to criticise them was that we should be first tackling the plight of the homeless in our own society. Now it is absolutely true that we should be housing the homeless, but do you see what is going on when asylum seekers and the Aussie homeless are played off against each other. If first claim on our compassion and care is reserved for those who are born on the right side of

our borders, then to open our hearts and homes to asylum seekers is seen as a betrayal of our own citizens, and thus of our society, our nation, and our families. Which perhaps if we take Jesus at his word here, is an indication that that is precisely what we should be doing if we are serious about following in his footsteps.

A second issue over which we frequently hear accusations of betraying our families and the foundations of our society is the acceptance of sexual diversity, whether the issue be same-sex marriage or the acceptance of not only gay and lesbian people, but people who do not fit neatly into simple male or female categories, intersex and transsexual people. Sometimes the arguments get down to the politics of public toilets, but you will hear this described as an important symbol of essential God-given categories that must not be violated. Not only does that sound strangely reminiscent of the opposition to inter-racial marriage, but in fact the Apostle Paul was the one who told us that a strict binary division of male and female was no more relevant in the body of Christ than divisions into slave and free, Jew and gentile. Jesus has broken down the dividing walls, he said. But if you really follow him on that, you can expect to take some heat as a traitor to the institutions of family and the foundations of society.

A third obvious one would be open hospitality to Muslims. The flag waving protesters in Melton this week demanding that Muslims be deterred from moving into their neighbourhood were in no doubt that welcoming Muslims is incompatible with loving and caring for their own families and with being faithful patriotic Australians. Alison sent us a link this week to a story about a church in Arkansas that has welcomed the local Muslim community to use their church for prayers. And what struck me when I looked at that story was all the linked stories about people criticising them for it, all the way up to and including the governor of Arkansas. He argued that a Christian church shouldn't be being used for something that is the diametric opposite of Christianity. Perhaps that's true, but Islam is anything but the diametric opposite of Christianity. They are closely related faith traditions, and their diametric opposite is actually anything that would demand the maintenance of hostile and fiercely defended boundaries between peoples. Once again, the reaction seems to be exactly the sort of thing Jesus said would be directed at those who were serious about following him.

So this scary, count-the-cost, bad news is actually a sign of what is most radically good news about the gospel of Jesus the Christ. It is the radical good news of all people and all things being reconciled to one another in Christ. It is the radical good news that the dividing walls that separated us into suspicious and hostile factions are being broken down in Christ. It is the radical good news that whoever you are and wherever you come from and whatever you've been aligned with, Jesus is welcoming you into one new family that has its foundations not in divisive systems of social purity, but in a radical ethic of all-inclusive love and mercy and hospitality. It is a vision of the culture of God for which Jesus was willing to die if necessary, and for which he calls us to follow him in putting everything we have and everything we are on the line.

And if that sometimes seems like too high a price to pay, just consider the cost leaving the world to continue to divide itself up into hostile factions all seeking to destroy each other. In comparison to that Jesus once said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light. Come follow me, and I will give you rest."