

Baptism's Fine Print

My goodness! What a passage of scripture we have to contend with this morning. Did I just read that Jesus says that I have to give up all of my possessions if I want to be his disciple? And then even more than that, did he really say that I have to hate father, mother, wife, children and life itself if I want to be his disciple?

Whew! It makes me kind of wish that I had looked ahead more closely to which Sundays I'd take as vacation Sundays yet this year. Had I been on the top of my game, I just might have proposed to Jody that this be one of our vacation Sundays this year. Let a guest preacher be the one that has to deal with this challenging passage of scripture.

Then again, in our tradition, we preachers are not strictly bound to the scripture passages assigned to each Sunday of the year. That means this could have been one of those Sundays that I lay aside the lectionary and select a scripture reading and topic more pleasing to the ear—something perhaps that relates to the change of seasons, or the beginning of a new school year, or on this particular weekend, on the role of labor and hard work in the success of our nation. Yes, I could have done that, and as I finally sat down to prepare this sermon I was kicking myself a bit about my lack of strategic thinking and planning.

But then again, our new Thursday morning men's Bible study has been taking up the scripture passage for the upcoming Sunday in order to ponder and study the readings that they will be hearing about on Sunday. And Jody and I had agreed after all, early on, that apart from something really pressing, we'd stick to the assigned readings. By the way, one of the men who had been at the Bible study in the morning was in the church office on Thursday afternoon and said to me along the lines that that is a doozy of a scripture that you're going to have to preach from this Sunday. I agreed with him and asked that he'd pray for me.

Give up all of your possessions in order to be Jesus' disciple.

Hate your family members if you want to be Jesus' disciple.

When we were doing our worship staff planning that included today's service, the comment was made that it's a good thing that this isn't the sermon text for "Welcome back Sunday."

Just what are we to make of these harsh sounding words of Jesus? They seemingly stand in contradiction to everything we want to say to those we invite to become followers of Jesus. Isn't following Jesus and being his disciple something that is to give us strength and hope and encouragement in our daily living? Isn't love at the heart of the good news that Jesus shared in his day and that we share in ours? Isn't turning our lives over to God in response to God's call in Jesus to transform our lives for the better? Aren't we to be grateful to God for the bountiful blessings that we have, including our possessions?

On that score, it's also probably a good thing, that with this scripture focus, today is not the kick off Sunday for our fall financial stewardship campaign. Guess we dodged a bullet on that one.

All light-heartedness and kidding aside, this passage of scripture made it through the scrutiny of all the editors and scribes over the ages who sought to keep the biblical texts as close to the originals as possible. It's firmly established to be as authentic as is any other parts of the New Testament texts that speak of Jesus' life, ministry and teachings. So, yes, Jesus really did say that in order to be his disciple

you have to hate mother, father, siblings, spouse. And yes, Jesus really did say that you have to give up all of your possessions if you want to be Jesus' disciple.

Because these hard sayings have been in our scriptures from the beginning, teachers, students, scholars and preachers have been wrestling with the meaning of these texts so that we might learn from them and in so doing be strengthened in our faith and commitment to Jesus.

Key to better understanding what Jesus means here is to look at what it means to be a disciple in the first place—in general, and specifically here, a disciple of Jesus. A disciple is a follower who devotes his or her life to the one who is followed.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to commit to following Jesus and to devote your life to Jesus. It's a simple and straightforward understanding with a clear and specific focus.

From the time of Jesus until this very day, that discipleship begins with an acceptance of Jesus' call to discipleship followed by a commitment to be a disciple. In our tradition that discipleship begins with baptism.

In baptism one is turning from life without Jesus to life with Jesus. In that turning from the old life to the new life, the baptized declares that Jesus is Lord and Savior, that he or she trusts in Jesus, and that he or she intends to follow where Jesus leads.

And, of course, baptism takes place in water. In Jesus' day, the one being baptized is submerged under water by the one performing the baptism, and then is brought up from under the water and declared to have been baptized. Water is used in this way to symbolize death and resurrection. Water, while an absolutely essential element for human life without which we would perish, is also a source of death and destruction if it is not respected. Just look at the terrible destruction that we've witnessed in south Louisiana last month after the torrential rains that caused massive flooding with death and destruction resulting. The symbolism of water in baptism is powerful in pointing to the death to the old life before Jesus and the resurrection to new life with Jesus.

Water is also understood to be a powerful symbol of cleansing and purifying. In this case, washing away our sin and cleansing us for our new life with Jesus.

By the way, if you've witnessed baptisms in the Presbyterian church, as well as in many other Christian churches, the amount of water used can be minuscule. Our baptismal font here probably holds about a quart of water at the most. So rather than going under the water, submerged in a pool or river or lake, the one being baptized here goes under the water as water is placed or sprinkled from above on his or her head. Yes, he or she is going under the water and rising from it, but the power of water to kill and to cleanse is harder to visualize and takes a bit more imagination.

The transformative power of baptism is the same though, whether it is done by immersion or done by sprinkling. For it is God's power and God's action that is at the heart of baptism no matter how it is administered.

While baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life as a disciple of Jesus, there are implications that result from that moment of transformation. If we say that Jesus is our Lord and our Savior and that we intend to follow him, that means, at its core, that there are no other commitments that compete with it or are commensurate with it. So our commitments to our families, our commitments to our jobs, our commitments to our nation, our commitments to our possessions all are secondary or subsidiary to our paramount and primary commitment to Jesus.

When Jesus says that we must hate our parents, children, spouses, and siblings he is not in any way suggesting that we are to have any ill-will toward them. The word hate carries so much baggage with it in our language and culture. To hate is to direct negative and destructive energy toward that which is hated. While Jesus uses this word very intentionally to make his point, the word in this context means to eliminate any devotion or commitment.

So just as Jesus calls on disciples to give up their possessions in order to not be distracted by them from devotion to following Jesus, so too with family commitments—they must not in any way compete with or distract from one's ultimate and sole devotion to Jesus.

One Bible scholar has suggested that what Jesus is sharing here with the crowds who were listening that day was the fine print on the baptismal covenant.

In most legal covenants that we make, there is the basic understanding of the transaction that is taking place—say the purchase of a home. I as the buyer agrees to pay you the seller a specific sum of money to transfer ownership from you to me. However, anyone who has ever purchased a home knows that there are pages and pages and more pages and pages of fine print related to this basic transaction. All of that fine print points to the implications of the transfer of ownership from you to me.

Baptism is also a seemingly simple and straightforward covenant as well—marking my change of focus and devotion from the things of this world, including my possessions and my relationships, to devotion to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So how good are we at following these teachings of Jesus—the injunction to make our devotion to our families secondary to our ultimate devotion to Jesus? As well as the injunction to give up our possessions in order to follow Jesus? Well if you're like me, you may still be squirming a bit as you ponder your own level of compliance.

It's not easy to be the perfect disciple of Jesus. Anyone who has ever said that it is easy to be a Christian, either didn't really understand the full depth of devotion to God through Jesus or simply was misstating what it means.

But like all of the other standards to which we hold ourselves and even the standards to which God holds us, we are not left alone to live out those expectations. Because the other amazing aspect of Christian discipleship is the work of Jesus himself on our behalf. For when it is all said and done, even though we're held to the highest standards of discipleship, we are judged not solely on our own level of success. For if we were, we would all—every last one of us—fail to meet the mark.

That's where the good news—the amazing good news—of God's love in Jesus Christ comes. Nowhere is this better expressed than it is in our church's Confession of 1967.

The same Jesus Christ is the judge of all people. His judgment discloses the ultimate seriousness of life and gives promise of God's final victory over the power of sin and death. To receive life from the risen Lord is to have life eternal; to refuse life from him is to choose the death which is separation from God. All who put their trust in Christ face divine judgment without fear, for the judge is their redeemer. (*Book of Confessions*, 9.11)

Praise be to God that the judge is our redeemer. Praise God that our walk as disciples is evaluated by the judge who is our redeemer.