

The Costly Christian Life

sermon digest

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Matthew 10:1, 16, 24-33, 39-42; 16:21-26

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Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on the words: "Having received the costly grace of God in Christ, we commit ourselves to the costly life of Christian discipleship, taking our cross, denying self, and following Christ."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's devotional classic *The Cost of Discipleship* might have been lost in the cemetery of old books had it not been for the biography of the young man who wrote it. The young pastor was barely thirty when he wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." What does a thirty-year-old know about life much less about death? But this was an exceptional man writing in exceptional times. This son of a respected Berlin psychiatrist had become a respected theologian in his own right, and almost from the beginning he had been an outspoken critic of Hitler. Having come under the constant surveillance of the SS, he was finally arrested for participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler; and at age 39 in April, 1945, he was hanged. Bonhoeffer's untimely death was more than another atrocity committed by the Nazis; it was a fulfillment of his prophetic work and life.

In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer's word for the German Lutheran Church that had compromised with Hitler in order to survive was "cheap grace." His warning for true disciples of every generation was that the "costly grace" of God reflected in the cross of Jesus Christ comes at a dear price for every follower of Jesus. The cross at the center of Christian faith is more than a symbol that recalls the execution of Jesus. He wrote, "The cross is laid on every Christian." The word of the cross was about as relevant to Nazi Germans as it was to Roman Christians, but it leaves us with a question.

Is the cross a relic of a past generation or a timeless symbol? What about it? Is the cross-centered gospel relevant to the circumstances and times in which we live? John Dominic Crossan calls death by crucifixion "State terrorism." Josephus reported 2,000 simultaneous crucifixions at the end of the first Jewish-Roman war. Men, women, and children were hanged on crosses at prominent sites to terrorize the population. They were like warning posters to any who dared to oppose Rome. We get a current taste of the psychology involved in the practice of video beheadings of terrorist victims. I feel a sigh of relief every time I read about the horrors of Roman society that the cross has been abandoned in the modern world. Even in primitive states that continue to practice capital punishment, the trend is toward finding a painless route to ending the life of the condemned. Crucifixions, burning alive, the rack, and other primitive forms of torture are not practiced by civilized nations. So we can read passages about the Christian cross with a comfort level that first century Christians could not imagine. It is like reading about demon possession or a flat earth. These are relics of another age.

The event is the watershed moment in the Gospels. According to Matthew, Peter has distinguished himself among the twelve with the confession, "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God"; and Jesus has inaugurated the church on the bedrock of Peter's confession. This is a high and holy moment, one to celebrate and cherish. Then Jesus breaks into the revelry with his first warning about an approaching cross. Peter, now the spokesman for the new community, steps up to rebuke his rabbi with a word to the wise. Perhaps the grand statement blessing Peter's confession has gone to his head. The now-prince of Apostles calls Jesus aside to discuss campaign strategy: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."

This is the beginning of a long struggle to understand the meaning of discipleship. In order to attract new followers, we need a strategy that accentuates the positive and de-cent-u-ates the negative. This may be a first attempt at "the power of positive thinking." The challenge keeps coming back. Let's talk about the benefits and rewards of the Christian life; no need to make a big deal about responsibility and demand. Let's stand and sing, "It Pays to Serve Jesus." These days it's called "the prosperity gospel."

Telling of life in Amarillo, Texas, A. G. Mjtabai writes in *Blessed Assurance* (pp 100-101), that some sort of *quid pro quo* between prosperity and piety is an index, a sign of righteousness widespread and long-held in Amarillo and the nation. These days you can find it in the Joel Osteen gospel of success. We are told that God wants everyone to be rich and successful. All we have to do is believe, and all good things will come our way. In the long-standing TV ministry tradition, you need to believe and pray with checkbook in hand. The cost of discipleship is a financial contribution to the movement. It's like an investment in the future. Give to this ministry and it will come back to you in overwhelming wealth.

Jesus was a lousy salesman, and I suspect that he would never have made it in TV evangelism. He put the price-tag out where everyone could see it. Peter represented a strong commitment to victory among the early followers of Jesus. They were schooled in Apocalyptic Jewish teachings about the coming of the Son of Man. The champion of Israel would overthrow the enemies of God put the People of God back in control. The victory fever was still intact at the time of the ascension according to Luke. The post-resurrection question of

the disciples was, “Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Read carefully, and you will begin to see that most of the followers of Jesus had a sense that they were joining the winning team. It was like a cold water baptism. Jesus had already set a standard when he sent out the Twelve in Matthew 10:39: “Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” At Caesarea Philippi he added insult to injury by a declaration to disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

“If” is conditional—a matter of continuing choice. Luke even adds the adverb “daily” to the decision to take the cross. It is a continuing, overt act of commitment. *Deny, take up, and follow* require personal initiative that goes beyond language of passive involvement or even surrender to Jesus as if he were the enemy.

The cross is a symbol of costly grace. Presbyterian minister John Purdy reflected on this “call to costly obedience” and rightly observed that you can make a biblical case for what he calls “Prudent Morality” that promises a life of abundant reward for doing what is right. I recall an early encounter in a congregational discussion after my lesson on Job that challenges the commonly held view that people get exactly what they deserve in life. In short, “It Pays to Serve Jesus.” I was less than a year out of seminary with little more than a foot into the real world. After hearing the case, Dan stood up and declared, “What you describe as the Jewish idea of justice is basically what attracts most of us to the Christian gospel. If we didn’t think it pays, we wouldn’t be here!” Christian success stories have usually stressed that God is constantly balancing the scales rewarding the righteous and punishing sinners. I can understand why the prosperity gospel hangs on and keeps coming back in new forms, but I can also understand why the invitation of Jesus to deny self, take up the cross, and follow is found in all of the first three Gospels. The crucifixion of Jesus changed everything. Here was the one just man who suffered without mercy from either the crass Roman rulers or the God of the universe. If he said, “take up the cross,” it must be a reference to the one that early Christians witnessed.

One does not have to dig very deep to find stories of martyrs of the faith in primitive experiences of early Christians and the more contemporary stories of people like Bonhoeffer. The hero stories are a bit intimidating. They suggest that none of us should die of natural causes or lead lives of joy and fulfillment, that all Christians are called to join Jesus on some tyrant’s cross. I can understand the protest I got from my friend Rabbi Herb Waller when I cited the symbol of the cross as a practical model for dealing with evil in the world. He saw it as suicidal politics and felt strongly in the face of the Holocaust, “never again.”

We are reminded that the very word martyr comes from the Greek word that means “witness.” Jesus was not against the abundant life. His own struggle in Gethsemane indicates a normal, human rejection of the obscenity of the cross. Jesus was not an ascetic believing that self-inflicted pain contains some intrinsic righteousness, and he did not advocate a process of personal atonement for sins by finding ways to bring down pain and suffering on oneself. Jesus did believe that speaking the truth in love comes at a price. He taught his disciples to bear witness to truth, even if it costs success, even at the cost of your life. That is the meaning of the cross.