

Unless You Hate

As you know, in life and in learning, context is everything. And that is particularly true on a day when we hear Jesus tell the crowd that is following him: “whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Very tough words. So tough we might be inclined to simply ignore them, reasoning that Jesus couldn't possibly have meant what the cold words appear to say. Yet, what a mistake that would be, since everything Jesus said is so crucial to your salvation and mine.

Here's the context. Just before, and just after Jesus says these hard words to the large crowds following him, he told them the stories of the Great Banquet, when everyone from every highway and bi-way was brought to the feast. He told them the parable of the Lost Sheep; about leaving the 99 and the joy of finding the 1. He told them the parable of the Lost Coin, and it being found; of the Lost Son, and of his return.

That is the context. Just before, and just after Jesus said these hard words; words spoken to a large crowd, Jesus explains at length the free gift of God's grace. That's what each of these parables is about. The free gift of God's grace.

Which begs the question: “If God's grace is free, is it also cheap?”

And that lingering question, hanging in the air, is the question Jesus answers today. He answers it in a way guaranteed to get their attention; the crowds, his disciples, you and I.

The word "hate" in English is defined as "intense hostility, usually coming from fear, anger, or a sense of injury." [Webster's Dictionary]. The Greek word, in the original Gospel of Luke, is MISEO. It can mean, "hate" as we define it. But it can also mean a "lesser love." It carries with it a sense that, if there is a conflict, one's call to be a disciple comes first over even the most sacred human relationships of spouse, parent, or child.

The highest duty is to God. "Lesser love" is owed to these other relationships.

Putting it a bit more bluntly, Jesus knows that while intimate human relationships are the source of great good; those same relationships can also be breeding grounds for prejudice, bigotry, nationalism, and all other sorts of short-sighted or stunted or other "less than who we are called to become" sinkholes. And it is at these crossroads where Jesus insists we follow him rather than spouse or parent or child.

"Grace is free", Jesus assures us, "but it is not cheap."

Salvation is God's free gift to humanity; but in order to be able to, first, tolerate it, and then, embrace it; perhaps we need to practice what that life is like.

Bishop Wright tells the story of the grandmother who was an accomplished musician. She played the piano and the violin. On her death, she left her beautiful violin and piano to her two granddaughters.

The granddaughter who received the violin took up the instrument and after time became as accomplished as her grandmother. The other grandchild, the one who received the piano, put that beautiful instrument in a place of great honor in her home, where it was dusted and admired, but never played.

After a time, the piano went out of tune, eventually woodworms invaded, and at the end, it was chopped up for firewood.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *The Great Divorce*, tells of people boarding a bus when they die, and getting off, after a long trip, on an enormous landscape made up of brilliant and very sharp crystals. The ground is so sharp it is almost impossible to stand.

Only as those who leave the bus eventually grow in the life of the Kingdom: learning compassion and generosity and forgiveness and acceptance; only then do they begin to grow larger; and eventually the hard crystals are not hard crystals, but blades of soft grass; and the enormous landscape begins to be seen as fields and meadows and streams.

The landscape didn't change, the people did.

As they embraced the Kingdom, they grew larger and in the growing larger, they took their rightful place in that new country.

Jesus today beckons us to practice the life of being a follower of Jesus. It is so much more than claiming a faith, only to leave it off to the side to be admired and dusted. To live the faith IS to LIVE the faith.

And as we practice the virtues of the Kingdom, as we practice compassion and integrity and generosity and justice, we will find ourselves getting better at doing those things; and as we get better, we will find ourselves growing larger: Larger of heart, larger of spirit, larger of soul.

That growth shows itself in very concrete ways. That which once injured or was hard to tolerate or was hard to swallow, remarkably becomes less painful, less hurtful, easier to accept.

And yet, there will be conflict on this journey. Forces in this world, forces in our own hearts, hate the Kingdom of God. Anyone who has taken even the first step in the journey to the Kingdom knows this to be true.

There is much within us that rebels. We will often fail. But, don't lose heart!

The same Jesus who insists on our allegiance, also promises that his yoke is easy, his burden light. The same Jesus who challenges us to our deepest marrow also promises that he will never leave us orphans.

We are like clay in the potter's hands.

Yield to the potter, asking only that he make of you that which is pleasing to him. In that yielding we are on the true path.

In that yielding, our growth is assured.

In that yielding, the doors to the kingdom of heaven are open.

+amen

