

Luke 14:25-33

Today's reading is really difficult, and I don't mean difficult just in the Bonhoeffer cost-of-discipleship way. Which is plenty, you know. It's difficult because of how it falls on modern ears *and* because of the polarization we live with in these times. I alluded to it in a conversation with my friend Kate, who is a formidably erudite person but not a church person, not even in childhood. It fell on her ears with novelty, and even though I'd warned her that it involved figures of speech and an idiosyncratic first-century way of talking, she recoiled when I said "you must hate your mother and father." It is offensive language. I made all the apologies again and explained that the hate-love binary is an idiom, and it really just means you have to choose and make a commitment. She still had to process it, though. It's not like my explanation landed in a really plausible way.

We all know how meaningful this passage was for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and how he challenged Christians to reject cheap grace and embrace costly discipleship. "When God calls a man," he wrote, "He bids him come and die." For Bonhoeffer,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the Cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace, real grace, said Bonhoeffer,

. . . is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

When Jesus says in Luke, that you have to hate your dearest family members and life itself in order to be his disciple, even if you subtract out the hate and understand that it's a vivid way of

saying you have to choose one at the cost of the other, he's serious. Jesus himself makes choices that he thinks are the most faithful ones, and they lead to his death. Bonhoeffer sees that living faithfully in his time and place means risking his life to rid the world of Hitler, and the price he pays is indeed his life. For us, we've taken this seriously to mean that discipleship entails sacrifice, and that death itself should not be out of the question, awful as that might be.

I am no longer sure that this is a helpful passage to emphasize in our own time and place. I think the reading is correct, that discipleship is costly, and I will hold to that. But we live in a time that is so polarized, and people are so atomized and not embedded in healthy communities, that this dramatic call to commitment may lend itself to atrocity, not discipleship.

I listened to a podcast about Synanon recently, the 1970s California alternative community that started as a drug rehab program and became a pretty brutal lifestyle. They emphasized rigorous self-discipline and a willingness to subject yourself to harsh verbal attacks by other members, in the name of overcoming one's weaknesses and fulfilling one's potential. So if anything was hard, it was good for you. After a few years, the founder, Chuck Dederick, decided that they should not reproduce any more because children were expensive. He decreed that all the men should get vasectomies, and they all lined up stoically to get snipped, even the men in their teens and twenties. Then the women felt like they weren't doing their part, so the pregnant women got abortions—even a woman in her eighth month. That right there did it for me. That level of commitment turns my stomach. Chuck Dederick as much as said "Discipleship is costly, if it's easy it's not discipleship," and people freely of their own volition chose to do what was painful and hard and in fact should not have been done.

More recently white Christian nationalism has been on the upswing, encouraged by the

45th president but not caused by him. It's been growing since the 1980s, with the growth of fundamentalism as a reaction against legislation banning racial discrimination (which led to segregation academies) and gender discrimination. This kind of Christianity is apocalyptic in nature, imagining the universe as being animated by the forces of good and the forces of evil, and disciples of Christ are called to battle for good, as they see it, as the end-times draw ever nearer. It doesn't matter that the end-times never do come, and it doesn't matter that human beings are complicated and issues are complicated and that black and white aren't enough colors to represent reality. They see in polarities, and it permits extreme behavior and the demonizing of those who disagree with them.

Polarities are not a useful spiritual tool, at least right now, is what I'm saying. Jesus says that we have to commit wholeheartedly to discipleship, and Bonhoeffer says that even death can't invalidate the value of following Jesus. Fine. But right now I think we need to recover the playfulness of Desmond Tutu and the bliss of Dame Julian of Norwich. We need to emphasize that God is good, all the time, and that hardship and sacrifice are only part of faithful life. We need to cultivate ways to reach across polarization and celebrate imperfection.

There's a guy named Dave Kresta who uses the metaphor of God as a great orchestra conductor. I found out about him from Caroline, because in her work she's all about helping local communities develop economic resources. There are a lot of depressed neighborhoods in Chicago where churches meet in storefronts on Sunday and Wednesday, but sit vacant the rest of the time. Her thought is that there might be a role for those churches to share their space with small businesses as a way to develop some internal community robustness. So anyway, she got on a call with this Dave Kresta the other day, but not before she had sent me a link to

his website and I had looked him up. His thesis is that churches should be engaged in *community* economic development (not traditional economic development, which often widens the cracks in the social matrix), and he's written a book called *Jesus on Main Street*, which he requests that you buy from your local bookseller instead of Amazon. So it's on order.

Anyway, Caroline said that Kresta said that it turned out that he was more focused on affluent churches that have a lot of real estate, which kinda makes sense, but that he was interesting to hear from and he told her the UCC is ahead of the curve on building reuse and update stuff. Also she told him about Crossroads *not* having real estate and how that's a gift, but that's a total aside.

I went on Dave Kresta's website, and he uses this metaphor of God as orchestra conductor. Let me quote:

[God] is creating music, so to speak, bringing together a variety of instruments and voices with wonderful and joyous harmonies along with discordant and painful melodies. Guided by this view of God, instead of taking a me-centered approach, let's consider a God-centered approach. A me-centered approach focuses on which instrument I'm supposed to play, how I can get better at that instrument, and how I sound alongside my neighboring musicians. Of course, I want to be the best instrumentalist for God, but in a me-centered approach, it is still about how I can be the best to fulfill my role. A God-centered approach, on the other hand, puts the focus on the song and the orchestra he is creating, realizing that even the best instrumentalist can wreck a performance by ignoring the conductor. A God-centered approach listens for the music, joins in, rejoices in the wholeness of the production, and entrusts the performance to God the Great Conductor.¹

We American Christians really need to start thinking of ourselves as members of God's orchestra, not members of God's army. I know this is a little meta, but the figures of speech that assume one good thing opposed to another good thing, and the necessity of choice between them, are not helpful in a time when people are divided from each other anyway and susceptible to black-and-white thinking. If we want to take in Jesus' message from this passage,

I think we need to express it as God directing all of us in a sublime piece of music, and us loving and taking joy in every member of the orchestra. Do we play along with the sour notes? No; we are not going to adapt willy-nilly like members of an alcoholic family who refuse to see the elephant in the room. We have processes to correct the sour notes. But we also do not cast into the outer darkness those who seem not to belong in our orchestra. Faithfulness requires a certain level of trust in God's goodness and God's benevolence, such that weirdness and imperfection can be tolerated as steps in the process rather than signs of the apocalypse.

This is a time for generosity of spirit and a capacity for laughter. This is a time to offer our distressed sisters and brothers a hand, a kindness, a delicious meal. This is a time to downplay polarities and seek mutuality—not ignoring differences, but emphasizing the grace of God above all. It is all the more necessary because of the desperate and apocalyptic times in which we live. People need to hear and see how good and gracious and kind and generous God is. Like this, from Gerard Manley Hopkins:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.ⁱⁱ

Let us pray: Save us, O God, from a timid, half-hearted faith that shrinks from the cross. Help us to leave behind the need for approval or the assurance of fitting into a groove. Give us courage in

the moments of decision, that we will accept the cost of discipleship with Jesus and thus learn to know its joy. Amen.

ⁱ <https://jesusonmainstreet.com/2021/07/02/conclusion/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44389/as-kingfishers-catch-fire>