

Have you ever made a commitment to an organization or committee without first finding out all that would be expected of you? Have you ever purchased something or joined a book club or applied for a low-interest credit card without first reading all the fine print? Jesus goes to great pains in the gospel lesson we just read to advise people to count the cost, to exercise informed consent. In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, “He stopped the car so the spiritual hitchhikers could get out.” Taylor explains, “He did not need people to go to Jerusalem to die with him. He needed people to go back where they came from and live the kinds of lives that he had risked his own life to show them: lives of resisting the powers of death, of standing up for the little and the least, of turning cheeks and washing feet, of praying for enemies and loving the unlovable.”

In the past few years we have witnessed an unholy alliance of some religious, political, and media leaders to promote a belief system called “white, Christian nationalism”. The proponents of this false doctrine speak of “turning America back to God” without acknowledging God’s concern for the “least among us” and for justice for the oppressed; without a commitment to imitate the life Jesus showed us. Russell Moore, incoming editor of Christianity Today comments: “Rather than cultivating a Christian vision of justice and the common good (which would have, by necessity, been nuanced enough to put us sometimes at odds with our political allies), we’ve relied on populist God-and-country sloganeering and outrage-generating talking heads.”

In stark contrast to these proponents of cheap grace, William Stringfellow, a lay theologian who was one of the great prophets of the 20th century, wrote, “A most obstinate misconception associated with the gospel of Jesus Christ is that the gospel is welcome in this world.” He then elaborated, “The conviction—endemic among church folk—persists that if the problems of misapprehension and misrepresentation are overcome..., the gospel will be found attractive by people, become popular, and even be a success of some sort.”

Like Stringfellow’s comments, the gospel lesson we just heard sounds very harsh. How will we ever build the church if we read texts like this one telling us to hate one’s father, mother, wife, children, even your own life, and all your possessions in order to follow Jesus?

To understand where Jesus is coming from, we must consider the context in which he spoke. He was on his way to Jerusalem, to the cross. His life was in danger and he knew that very well. And there they were, the crowds following him who didn’t have a clue of where this road was leading him and them. That is why he turned around and asked: “Do you really know what you are doing? Have you counted the cost of following me?”

Just as today, many of those following Jesus did so in order to profit from him, to see miracles, to cast off oppressive institutions, to escape poverty and get security that the world had not offered them. Jesus, however, wanted to give them another life, show them a different vision. They were thinking only of themselves, their families, their lives, their possessions. He was focused on the kingdom of God. He was thinking of a totally different change than they were, modeling a life in which sacrificial love would give birth to

a community of justice and peace, even if that meant bearing a cross to bring it to pass.

As we heard in our reading from Deuteronomy, we, too, are still asked to choose, to choose that life modeled for us by Jesus at such a great price. This is not a matter of giving intellectual assent to a creed, but of turning our wills over to Christ. God's Spirit leads us into opportunities to grow in faith by investing ourselves where Christ is still to be found, ministering to and with those who hunger for justice and peace in a broken, conflict-laden world.

Many years ago there was a twelve year old boy named Samuel Oliner. He was Jewish, living in Poland, when the soldiers came to round up all the Jews in his village. His step-mother anticipated what was happening. As they were being herded by troops toward the village square she saw a hole in the fence at the side of the road. Her last words to Samuel before she was shot with the rest at the village square, were "Samuel, run through that hole and go to the woods." Oliner escaped into the woods and hid there for several days and nights, not knowing what to do. He was eating berries, afraid for his life, totally alone. And then he remembered a Christian woman in his neighborhood who, in his words, "seemed to care". A simple, ordinary woman who cared. In the dark of night, Samuel went to her house and she, at great risk to herself and her family, took him in. She taught him the Catholic catechism and he committed it to memory. For the rest of the Holocaust, if anyone accused him of being a Jew he would stand there and start reciting the catechism, and he knew it to the day he died. What's more, because of the witness of a humble Christian woman who cared, Samuel Oliner

devoted his life to studying “altruism”, and what causes people to care.

Like that Polish Christian woman who “cared”, Jesus still comes to each of us, asking you and me, “Will you follow me, embracing sacrificial love, to experience the life that I offer?” One of the names by which early Christians identified themselves was “a follower of the Way”. Their identification with the “way” of Jesus Christ denoted a willingness to surrender personal ambitions and security in favor of living by the rule of Christ—the rule of love and peace that gives life.

Followers of the Way did not rely on faith as a means to help them cope as individuals with life’s insecurity and pain. Instead, faithful to Jesus’ example, they intentionally proclaimed the triumph of Christ’s saving love by building a community whose presence provided an alternative to the structures of society. The early Christians challenged the status quo by treating women the same as men, by breaking down barriers of race and class, Jew and Gentile, living by love instead of power. In so doing, they embodied a faith based on a living relationship with Jesus that grows stronger and more vital and precious as one follows Jesus and experiences the power of love to overcome evil.

“Count the cost”, Jesus advises us. To experience the freedom and peace for which we yearn, we will have to surrender our lives completely to God and no one—not even our nearest and most beloved—can be permitted to interfere with the service of Jesus Christ. But this way of life also carries a promise. In the 18th chapter of Luke’s gospel, when Peter said to Jesus, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you”, Jesus replied: “Truly I tell you, there is no

one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”

To us, Jesus still asks, “Will you follow me?” Is today the day when God is calling you and me to give up our image of the future in favor of seeing the future through his eyes? To do so is not a promise that God will magically intervene and do away with all evil or that we will see injustice disappear from our world. It is a promise that God will equip you and me to bear his word of life in a world that lives in fear so we can be like that Polish Christian woman who cared. It is a promise that God will forgive us when we give into fear while there is work to be done. It is a promise that our Lord will companion us just as he led his people through the desert into the promised land. It is a promise that in these times in which the gospel is distorted by some in order to gain power, the church’s witness to Christ’s saving love for all people will overcome evil with good.

With this promise before us, we can hear Christ’s call to follow him not as a burden, but an invitation. It is an invitation into community through which we are strengthened to follow Jesus’ way of sacrificial love that leads to life in abundance.