

Sunday September 4, 2022
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Parishioner Reflection

By: Kerry Tucker

Have you heard of the “hard sayings of Jesus”? For some Christians, it is a familiar way of talking about some things that Jesus said in Scripture that, from a human point of view, would be difficult to believe or do. For me, one of these hard sayings appears near the start of today’s Gospel reading. In it, Jesus says, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, spouse and children, brothers, and sisters, yes, and even their life itself, cannot be my disciple” (Living with Christ, Sunday Missal 2021-2022, 512-513). How can anyone, humanly speaking, despise the members of their immediate family; their parents, their siblings, their husbands or wives, their children and perhaps, most challengingly, their own lives to follow Christ?

Jesus goes on to say more difficult words to the masses of people who were following him around at the time, “Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple” (Living with Christ, Sunday Missal 2021-2022, 513). The word “cross” that Jesus uses here would very likely have had an immediate visceral effect on the crowd around him. Since, according to a note on v. 27 in The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha, RSV, Expanded Edition (1977), it was a cross that Israel’s Roman occupiers used at that time to execute people. And those being executed were required to carry their cross to the site of their death. It would probably have been like someone today speaking about self-administered lethal injections.

Shocking, yes. But that is what Jesus was trying to do. Shock the crowd around him. According to another note in The New Oxford Annotated Bible on v. 26, he was using hyperbole. Jesus sometimes did this, to drive home his point. And, in this case, his point is the cost of discipleship. The New Oxford Annotated Bible goes on to say in a note on v. 27 that Jesus is not literally meaning that we have to “hate” our relatives, or our own lives to follow him. Rather, he is saying, as can be seen in a parallel passage (Matt. 10: 37-38) that we must love him more than we love our families or ourselves or we are not living up to his call on our lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German minister and theologian, who lived during the Nazi regime. He wrote a book at that time that when translated into English was given the title, The Cost of Discipleship (Wikipedia, “The Cost of Discipleship”, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cost_of_Discipleship. Accessed August 30, 2022). Perhaps the English publisher was thinking of Jesus’ words in this passage when they chose the title. Because in it Bonhoeffer, principally, argues for a “costly grace” against what he saw as a “cheap grace” in the German state church of his day. He wrote that “Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves...grace without discipleship...Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again...It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a [person] the only true life”

In his own life, Bonhoeffer seems to have embraced the high price of following Christ. He chose a “costly grace” and in so doing may provide Christians with a modern instance of what being a true disciple of Jesus looks like. According to the Amazon.ca website, “Bonhoeffer...was an exemplar of sacrificial faith: he opposed the Nazis from the first and was eventually imprisoned in Buchenwald and hung by the Gestapo in 1945”

(<https://www.amazon.ca/Cost-Discipleship-Dietrich-Bonhoeffer/dp/0684815001>).