

Imagine Jesus interviewing for a position as a vicar in a small church in Utah that's interested in attracting more members: The Senior warden says "We've heard that you've got quite a following Tell us, Jesus, about some of your ideas for growing the church:

I'm going to tell people up front that they'll need to

- 1) hate their families,
- 2) walk a really difficult path to certain shame and ridicule.
- 3) give up all their possessions."

It's hard to imagine he'd make it past the first interview, isn't it?

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his teaching has been full of what are known as "difficult sayings" What could be more difficult than giving up all your possessions? giving up your family? Giving up your comfortable life?

This is the same man who told us to love our enemies. Love your enemies, but hate your family. Jesus, does this make any sense? how are we going to win people over to your side with stuff like this? One wonders if he isn't trying to thin out the crowds that were constantly following him.

As always we must examine the cultural context in which Jesus spoke these words. In our culture, some of us are surrounded by family members, but many of us, myself included, are separated from their family by 1000s of miles so we connect with family by phone and facebook. The family we interact with on a daily basis are friends we have chosen.

People are no different than they were then, but their culture sure differs from ours. If you had no blood-related family, you were truly alone. Widows and orphans and lepers were dependent on mercy and justice and had to be cared for by those who loved God,.

Family identified who you were to the world. It assigned your role and a level of honor you held in the community. It determined what you were going to do with your entire life. So it's even more shocking that Jesus spoke these words in his culture: hate your family, in a culture in which family was everything.

"Hating one's family" is an example of a classical rabbinic technique used to make a point called hyperbole. Exaggeration. This is not something we do much anymore, unless you're a teenager. Or a politician. It is expression of preference by pairing two things and showing **preference** for the one by hating the other. it demonstrates a different understanding of priorities. Jesus pairs love of one's family with love of God's purpose. If you have to choose one over the other, choose what God has in mind. Your priority is to be with God and his will.

His second difficult saying points to the cross. Crosses on our mantles, our walls, around our necks mark us, I hope, in this culture as followers of Jesus, but that is certainly not what Jesus intended when he spoke of bearing one's cross. What we have made into decoration, Jesus' culture knew not only as an instrument of death, and but even more as a mark of ultimate shame.

We've even taken the sting out of the phrase "bearing one's cross" so that it is more bearable: bearing one's cross can now mean putting up with a financial setback, a chronic illness, or a boss whose demands are impossible.

Jesus final difficult saying is one we've heard from him before: give up your possessions. Jesus especially identified with the poor at a time when there certainly was not anything trendy about "living lightly". Having nothing meant having nothing to sell, nothing with which to trade. It meant having to beg on the side of the road, with people not looking you in the eye.

Jesus was speaking not to his disciples, not to those who were already committed to him. The text tells us that he was moving in a swarm of people who were curious, interested in this person in whom so many others were interested. Jesus goes on to offer these seekers a few scenarios to ponder before he invites them into discipleship:

Think of it this way, Jesus begins: If you were going to build a tower, you'd want to know how much money it would take, right? and you would want to know how much money you've got available to you. If you were going to war, you'd want to know how many troops you have and the number and ferocity of the enemy.

These stories suggest the fine print in the covenant of discipleship. In case they didn't get the message from his requirements of hating one's family, bearing one's cross and giving up everything you own, Jesus wants seekers everywhere to know, that there is more to discipleship than listening to him tell stories, more to discipleship than watching him heal and feed people, more to discipleship than being members of a local congregation. We'd often rather come to church to hear God's commitment to us rather than our own commitment to God. And he is inviting us to go deeper into that commitment. Each day.

Jesus isn't threatening anyone with these "difficult sayings" He's doing the loving thing by making a full disclosure. By refusing to make discipleship sound easier than it is in order to increase his numbers or popularity. Jesus is suggesting that we do a cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment before we hit the road with him. Barbara Brown Taylor says Jesus didn't want us to think that we were running away with the circus when we're really running into battle.

This gospel was written AFTER Jesus death. and Jesus' followers were already being persecuted. The earliest disciples had to leave home or put their families in danger. When they left they could take minimal provisions with them. They had to make serious choices in life and death situations, and trust completely in God's goodness and love for them.

Discipleship, Jesus is telling us, will mean an intentional arrangement and most likely, rearrangement of our relationships and priorities. We might stumble into church membership. We might be born into church membership or marry into church membership. But there is no stumbling into discipleship. God calls us to discipleship, which we must choose and nurture every day. None of us does it perfectly. Not a single one of us.

I'm sorry, I can't remember who said this: The cost of discipleship, is paid in many kinds of currency – in a redirection of political thinking, in the amount of attention we pay in weighing difficult decisions. Thinking about your life as something of value to God which should be spent well. Paying attention. Considering that people matter to God and my choices concerning relationships and money and time matter to God too.

Jesus is telling us that following God must make a difference in our lives. Consider what difference God makes in your life. How are you called to respect the dignity of every human being in little and big ways every single day? Do you find ways to nurture your relationship with God? How will you proclaim the good news of God's love? How will we seek and serve Christ in all persons? How are we called to do that in our common life, living in this place at this time?

Carrying the cross, paying the price of discipleship is not for everyone. Fear that we won't be able to bear the price, much less the cross, keeps some of us from even considering it. None of us really has what it takes. that's why Jesus did it for the rest of us to fill in our gaps. We must never forget that.

I don't know that Jesus would have fared well in a search process. Jesus never intended to be a people pleaser. He lays out the costs of discipleship but also provides us with everything we need to embrace the new life he offers and to flourish as disciples: the love of God our Father and the relentless guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus has paved the path of discipleship himself, and has promised to be there with us. May our glorious God make a difference in who we are and what we do, and give us strength to choose to follow him.