

The cost of discipleship

Clay is an amazing kind of earth. It can be dug out of the ground and then shaped and molded into useful or artistic forms. In Uganda, much of the earth is clay. Its red dust is everywhere. In front of most of the houses are piles of home-made bricks drying in the sun, or stacked into a pyramid with holes at the bottom where wood burns for 24 hours to fire them. Until firing, clay can be reshaped over and over again, even if it dries, it can be re-worked with more water.

Jeremiah knew how the potter could re-work pots that either got off-center on the wheel, or collapsed in the potter's hands. To center a pot on the wheel, it takes a steady strength and quite a bit of pressure. Jeremiah uses the scene at the potter's to invite us to imagine ourselves as clay in the potter's hands, being lovingly and powerfully molded, just as the maker wants. What would it feel like to be clay in the hands of the master? What would it feel like to let ourselves be molded however the potter wished? The difference between clay and us is that clay is just an inanimate object, but if we want to let God fashion us into God's beloved, we have to choose to let God do that for us and in us. God will not force our clay to take any shape at all. He'll wait—either for our permission to do as he wishes, or for our invitation.

Jesus' words to us this morning about becoming his disciples make it painfully clear what's at stake.

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” These are hard words. We have to count the cost of following Jesus. Can we afford it? What is our spiritual budget? What is Jesus asking for in exchange for admitting us to the status of disciple?

Cost is what we give up in order to get something else: we exchange what we have for what we need or want. The cost of discipleship is the cross. Not just any cross. It is the cross of Christ, and although Jesus helps us bear its weight, we still have to pick it up and carry it. Jesus literally carried a heavy wooden cross up the hill to Golgotha—up the hill toward the spot where he knew he would die. His cross was more than a burden—more than something heavy and difficult to carry. It was where he was going to give his life and die. Carrying the cross of Christ means accepting our own death. So, Jesus is really asking us: “Are you ready to go all the

way? Are you willing to put me ahead of family, friends, and possessions? Because if you are, you will get all of this and more.”

How can God want to give us his cross if it means in so doing he is giving us the experience of dying? How can God want our death? Even when we baptize infants, we baptize them into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the candidate gets ready to get wet, we give thanks for the gift of water, saying, “We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.” Death is not the last word. It is just the necessary passage that leads to life.

God wants to give us life in all its fullness, and doesn't rejoice in our suffering. And yet there are lots of places in the Gospel that point to losing one's life in order to gain it. Jesus tells his disciples, unless the grain of wheat dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies, it produces many more grains. Think about your garden, or the farm, and how much it has produced just from a few seeds. Each of those seeds died, and then produced many times more than the one seed. So it is in the spiritual life. Little by little, the self-made person we have all worked so hard to create must crumble as Jesus builds us into our true selves—free from the fear of being good enough. Free from the fear of whether or not we are truly lovable. Free from the tyranny of our false self that is constantly clamoring for attention and needs to be in control. Jesus is offering another way. He assures us that we are the beloved children of God. We are loved in the same way that God the Father loves his son Jesus. We are made loveable Through God's loving us.

Jesus is redefining what the family is. It will no longer be defined by bloodlines. Instead, Jesus' family is comprised of all those who “hear the Word of God and do it.” We are linked to everyone who follows Christ. We are connected to each other through Christ. He stands in our midst and invites us to become his disciples—to become those who desire to get close enough to Jesus to be able to follow him wherever he leads. In choosing to become a disciple, somehow, we have decided that it is worth the cost.

We'll make some progress and we'll have some set-backs. Like the potter, God is ready to shape us into his radiant and joyful followers. Letting God replace our self-constructed selves with our true selves is painful. It feels like dying and loss, and it is, but through that experience of loss comes new birth. We can see some of this as our children grow up. They change amazingly at every stage, and as every new

stage is achieved, something old is left behind and lost forever. Those adorable little babies grow into rambunctious toddlers, who are replaced by inquisitive kindergartners, and before you know it, they are entering adulthood. They can't wear that adorable little outfit anymore. They aren't cuddly. As a parent, there is both the excitement and pride in all this growing mixed with a bit of nostalgia for how it used to be. But we wouldn't want any of our children to go back to the way it was before. The land of possibility and new life is ahead of us, not behind us. Yes, there has been loss, but there is also an abundance of new life. Even as we age and lose more and more of our former capacities, there is the new life of wisdom, experience, and perhaps even some acceptance of ourselves as truly loved by God.

When you really want something and know it is expensive, you save up for it and look forward to the day when you will have enough to complete the project or plan you are dreaming about. Whatever it is you are planning for, you have decided it's worth the expense. Take that equation and multiply it. If we decide that it is worth it to be disciples, then we are led to something far bigger and more amazing than we could ever imagine—far beyond whatever we had been saving up for, far more amazing than the projects and plans we are making. Those projects and plans might even be included in what it means to be a disciple. But, we can only find that out when we let go of them and choose to follow Jesus. God only wants us to have life in the fullest, and will help us let go of whatever it is that is holding us back.

Amen.