

Problem: What does it cost us to be a disciple of Jesus?

-I remember a couple of times while being a camp counselor, student employee at St. Olaf, or even as a nonprofit employee having “team builder” retreats. Always, one of the ridiculous exercises we would end up doing would be the “trust fall”. This is where someone stands on a ledge, arms across their chest, and when they are ready: begin to fall backwards into a group of people who catch them and bring them back up to a standing position. It’s a very weird sensation and very awkward to watch if you have ever seen it. But, in a silly way, this exercise gets us out of ourselves and requires us to put our trust in something beyond ourselves.

-Our rather challenging Gospel text today is Jesus setting up the parameters a little bit for a “trust fall” with God. It’s all about asking the question: what does it mean to trust God and follow Jesus Christ? The problem is that this text isn’t your average, laughing co-worker, gently catching you as you fall backwards kind of text. This text is Jesus “getting real” and using some tough language which might seem abrasive to many of us: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”(verse 26) Whoa!!! What on earth does he mean by this? Part of the answer is Jesus following many Greek philosophers of his time period and using an old technique of argument called: “reductio ad absurdum” or using an almost ridiculous or shocking claim to prove a point. His example of hating father and mother, building a tower with no plans, and a king going to war with no strategy are all extreme examples that point to a simple argument: there is a cost in totally trusting something beyond ourselves and being a disciple of Jesus Christ.

-It can be a hard argument to hear, as we are used to hearing from the broader church the benefits of a “trust fall” with God: loving and trusting God with all our heart, mind, and soul. Benefits that we will get such as: salvation, love, freedom, justice, and maybe just a good feeling. But, Jesus’ shocking, “get down and dirty”, “lay it all out there” point is that there is also a cost to this trust fall, some things we need to give up and let go of. So what are those things? What then does it mean to:love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, and soul?

Solution: Being a disciple of Jesus means trusting God beyond ourselves, family, or friends.

-Many of you might have heard of the Montessori method, or a method of teaching children pioneered by Maria Montessori in the early 20th century. There are multiple early childhood centers in Missoula that follow this method of teaching, and it has a proven track record for success. There is an interesting overview of the Montessori theory of teaching online which contains a good summary of what basic human needs and qualities are. “All human beings are born with a tendency toward self preservation, order and orientation, communication and imagination.” In a list of basic human traits

that all children have following this brief explanation, self-preservation was at the top interestingly. Self-preservation (fight or flight) seems to be hard-wired into us.

-This fact isn't, by any stretch, all bad. Self-preservation gets us up in the morning, drives us to do well and succeed, help us look out for situations that could cause us harm. But does it also get in the way?

-Martin Luther had to face what many of us can only imagine or read about in history books: a plague that was killing people and no one knew why. Many theological contemporaries of Luther called the plague God's punishment. Infact most people fled the town of Wittenberg where Luther taught at the University when various waves of the the disease kept hitting. Luther opened up his own house to the sick and miraculously did not catch it himself. He wrote about his own struggle in self-preservation and the possibility of fleeing, but who in the end felt "the call to love God to serve my neighbor has to come first".

-This example, I think, is what Jesus is getting at in our text today. What comes first? When the going gets rough and the outcome unknown, it's discipleship that needs to trump (no pun intended) self-preservation. We can see many examples of people choosing discipleship over their self-preservation, from getting a wounded soldier to safety to leaving nobody behind on an expedition that goes haywire, many people are able to trust something beyond themselves and do incredible things. But there is a cost. Yes, it could be one's earthly life, but really that is in extreme cases where many other factors are usually at play and it is not helpful nor responsible for me to generally throw that scenario out in a sermon. For most of us, the costs will be much more "ground level": not enjoying something for ourselves so that we can give it to someone else, missing a meeting at work in order to care for someone who is sick or dying, thinking not just how we can get as much money to retire as possible but what is actually enough and use the rest for something else. These "costs" seem trivial but are actually really really hard to live out, I think. It's an incredible challenge to say that we are willing to trust God, sometimes even over trusting our own family. It's the cost of reordering life and love.

Implication: What does your trust in God look like?

-I loved my grandfather a lot. He was an incredible pastor and one who taught me a lot about faith. But one thing I sometimes got frustrated with was his generalistic language that many times referred to "putting God first". I remember a discussion I had with him before leaving for college and him saying to me: "just make sure, now that you will be going to college and living on your own, that you see Christ as first. He will guide you." I know he meant this with the best of intentions, but I could never figure out really how to just "put Christ first". Sometimes I think we say these things, not because we really know the costs involved or how to really how to do it, but to just comfort ourselves in the generalities of faith.

-Lucky for us, Jesus does have a more specific direction in how to put “God first”. What is the greatest commandment? Love the LORD your God with all your heart, mind, and soul. AND love your neighbor as yourself.

-Remember asking my mom as a kid, “do you love God more than me” and my Mom saying: “It’s because I love God so much that I can love you so much”. Martin Luther says this too: I love my neighbor as an act stemming from loving and serving God.

- This is something helpful I hope we can be left with today: How do I trust God above all things? How to I put Christ first? By putting aside a little of our self-preservation and loving my neighbor. It is intimately linked maybe more than what we think.

-May we be able to think more about our “trust fall” with God. May we know the costs of commitment towards the divine and putting the divine first in our lives, it’s not easy nor well defined. But may we also have comfort that loving God first means mostly loving our neighbor and our earth as ourselves. Sometimes self-preservation isn’t always what it’s all about and may we be granted the wisdom, courage, and patience reach for something higher. Amen.