

Dear friends in Christ, grace & peace...

As some of you know, Pastor Apfel is engaged to be married. Trying to be helpful in the planning, I suggested this verse from the gospel as a wedding text: "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." We had a little chuckle imagining the reaction of a congregation hearing that text at a wedding....this is one of those **tough** texts. What does Jesus mean with this tough talk about what it takes to be his disciple? Isn't there too much hate in families already? We'd much rather hear comforting words like: "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Jesus tells two stories about 'what it takes' to be a disciple, and for want of better terms, I call this 'initiative' and 'finishative'. The story Jesus tells about initiative is a story of crisis: A king is about to mobilize his army of 10,000 against an army of 20,000. He takes stock of the situation and decides what has to be done...then takes the initiative to make peace with the enemy. It is that kind of shrewdness and initiative Jesus calls us to have as disciples. Think about the cost of being and of not being a disciple. There is a cost either way. We see lives that haven't been engaged in any kind of striving. They were lived with no sense of purpose, with no voice to follow except culture and the TV and popular opinion. Those wasted lives are examples of the cost of not being a disciple....of drifting in this world without initiative or commitment to something bigger than one's self. Jesus calls us to something more---to love God more than anyone or anything else; to bear a cross and follow, and to give up all that we have in order to receive greater gifts in Christ. Jesus asks us if we can afford not to submit to God's demands. In our first lesson we heard these words: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom..." There is a cost to being a disciple, and there is a cost for not being a disciple.

A congregation in Chicago built a beautiful new sanctuary just before the depression. What began in sacrifice continued in struggle, as people joined together to pay the mortgage during hard times. When the project was completed, they recognized that they needed education and fellowship space to continue their ministry. The mood toward another building program was negative, and in the congregational meeting there was a lot of apprehension. Then a young parent stood up and said..."Sure, it will cost us to build to meet the needs of our congregation. We have to count the cost. But remember that it will cost us even more if we decide not to build. The wise young man's comments convinced the congregation to sacrifice once again, and to build the addition. There is a cost of being disciples.

This is where we as churches have become soft. When we invite people to membership, we are careful not to offend them by saying what God requires of disciples. We are afraid they will go somewhere else where the assurance of salvation will be 'cheaper'. We don't want to lose those prospective 'joiners'. We avoid talking about the battle, the enemy, the cost of fighting the good fight of faith. Following Jesus is no invitation to an ice cream social. It is a call to give all we have. We need to look at the price tag as we begin the task of being a disciple.

Initiative is important, but even more important is finishative (not a real word, don't worry about spelling it right). You get the picture....what good is a good beginning, without a a good ending? The story of the unfinished tower tells it well: The plans and dreams and sacrifices that started such a project are wasted because the resources weren't there to finish what was begun. What began with purpose and initiative now is merely an embarrassment and a source of ridicule for those who look on. What a waste! We can imagine the humiliation of the man who could not finish a building project he began.....what about the 'finishative' of completing our discipleship?

As someone who conducts funerals, I am aware of the finishative in people's lives. Some are baptized, attend Sunday School, are confirmed... and then fail to continue those good things that God began in them. What a waste. Others, like a good curve ball, seem to have a poor start and then at the end pull cross the center of the plate, fulfilling what God intended all along. It is strange how often someone who can complete a 5,000 piece jigsaw puzzle, or crochet an afghan, or build a house, cannot cooperate in finishing the good things in one's life that God has begun. We need 'finishative' ---we need to pray that God would complete the things that have begun in us. And, being faithful unto death, we have the promise of a crown of life. There are no bargain basement deals on faith...it costs, it takes a lifetime of investment.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead was a young missionary in Madras, India. A young medical student came to him to be baptized. His parents threatened to cut him off from his inheritance, put him out of school, and disown him. Yet he did not ask for a secret baptism, was baptized in public worship, and was disowned. Many years later in London, this man appeared at Dr. Weatherhead's door and said, 'It was worth it, Sir, it was worth it'.

What does it cost to follow Jesus?---everything...from initiative to finishative. Many heard these hard words of Jesus, and many fell away. Even his disciples disappeared into the darkness when he was betrayed. But the interesting thing is that Jesus did not forsake them: this is our comfort as we hear these difficult words of Jesus...hope comes from knowing the gracious persistence of our Lord in surrounding us with his love. In spite of our failures, both in initiative and finishative, he is not done with us yet.

Rufus Jones, the great Quaker preacher, tells of his struggle with self as a child. His mother went to town and left him with a list of chores to do while he was gone. His friends came by and asked him to play, and he spent all day with them, not even thinking of his chores until he saw her return. He expected the whipping of his life, but instead she took him upstairs to his bedroom, knelt down, put her arms around him and prayed over and over, a dozen times with tears streaming down her cheeks: "Lord, make a man out of him. Lord, make a man out of him..." That changed his life. His mother's love and tears did what no whipping could do. And it's the same with us. What changes us is not threats of condemnation for our failure to be disciples; what changes us is knowing that we are wrapped in the arms of Christ who lived and died for us, who prays to the Father that we might grow up into his fullness, to be cross-bearers and disciples.

It pays to count the cost of doing anything well, from start to finish. May God give us open eyes and minds to see where following Christ will lead us. May we have also the 'finishative' to be faithful each day, each step along the way, not afraid to pay the cost of being Christ's disciples.

+The peace of God.....