Following Jesus

Dr. Cynthia E. Huggins

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Luke 14:25–33

One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, “Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father or mother, spouse, children, brothers and sisters—yes, even one’s own self—can’t be my disciple. Anyone who won’t shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can’t be my disciple.

“Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn’t first sit down and figure the cost so you’ll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you’re going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you, saying, ‘He started something he couldn’t finish.’

“Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can’t, won’t he send an emissary and work out a truce?

“Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can’t be my disciple.”

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Jesus doesn’t cut us any slack here, does he? He’s talking about the personal cost of being his disciples or students, the cost of following him. If we refuse to let go of a child, parent, spouse, or sibling, we can’t be his disciple. If we aren’t willing to let go of our friends, family, or plans, we aren’t really following him. No wonder these are sometimes referred to as the most hated verses in the Bible.

In the passage from the Book of Haggai that I read earlier, what were the Hebrews refusing to let go of? When they returned to Jerusalem after seventy years of exile in Babylon, they started rebuilding the temple. But the new temple wasn’t the same as the old temple that had been destroyed. The new temple was smaller, less impressive, without all the flashy gold and silver.

And instead of being grateful that they were back home in Jerusalem and able to worship Yahweh in their own temple again, the Israelites were upset—discouraged and depressed—about being forced to let go of their previous, much-loved temple. So God spoke to them through Haggai and told them to do three things: “Remember my promise to always be with you, don’t be afraid, and get to work. If you do that,” God told them, “I’ll fill this new church with glory, and you will find peace here.”

God isn’t being transactional with the Israelites. He’s not saying, “If you’ll give me this, I’ll give you that.” Instead, he’s trying to get them to see what the results of their own efforts could be, if they stop focusing on what they’ve lost, and focus on God instead.

I think that Jesus is doing something similar in the fourteenth chapter of Luke. He isn’t saying that our friends and families, our homes and jobs, even our churches shouldn’t be important to us. But they should not be more important to us than the Sacred and Holy God who created them and gave them to us in the first place. Jesus is trying to get us to understand that nothing should be more important to us than God, that we shouldn’t love anyone or anything more than we love God.

And again, Jesus isn’t being transactional. He doesn’t say that God will stop loving us if we aren’t willing to give up this, that, or the other. God’s love for us doesn’t depend on anything we could possibly do or say. We’ve done nothing to make God love us, and there’s nothing we can do to lose that love.

However, I do think that Jesus is cautioning us that being a child of God and being a true disciple of Jesus are two different things. If there’s something in my life that I place before God—that matters to me more than God—I’m not really following Jesus. I’m still a child of God, but I’m not really a disciple. We all have those things in our lives, don’t we? And it’s not always people—sometimes we place too much importance on our plans, or our habits, or the past. So often we’re afraid of things changing because that might result in us losing something that we value.

Jesus is asking us to step back and take a close look at what matters most to us. If something—anything—is keeping us from really following Jesus, which basically means being of service to other people, can we find the strength within ourselves to let it go?

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I grew up with a father who couldn’t stop drinking and thus couldn’t hold down a job, so we were a very poor family. From a young age, I struggled with low self-esteem because of my family’s situation. My defense was to try to be invisible and never to draw attention to myself.

As soon as I started first grade, though, I began to attract attention for being a “smart little girl.” I heard it from my school teacher, my grandmother, my aunts and uncles, my Sunday School teacher—all of the adults in my life, including Mom, consistently described me as a “smart little girl.” Gradually my self-esteem became cemented around that label of being “smart,” and I came to see it as the only reason why anyone loved me.

This pattern continued through high school. I earned good grades, and people admired me for being smart. I didn’t have many friends, because invisible kids never learn how to make friends, but at least I was smart. Then I went to college and discovered that actually there were a lot of people smarter than me, so why would anyone love me? It was a miserable four years.

But then I graduated and got a job, and it turned out that I was really good at my job. I was good with details, had a lot of common sense, always planned ahead, loved problem solving—all the things that employers look for. So I went from being a smart little girl to being a good employee—and my self-esteem shifted and became dependent on doing a good job. If I did a good job, in my mind, people would love me—or at least respect me.

When I was twenty-four years old, my boss called me into his office, and my world fell apart. He had several critical things to say about how I was doing my job, and I was devastated. Maybe I wasn’t capable of doing a good job after all—and if that was true, why would anybody ever love me? I left his office, went out in the woods, and spent most of the afternoon crying. The next morning, I quit my job.

This pattern has continued throughout my adult life. My self-esteem has remained closely tied to doing a good job of whatever task I take on. When the quality of my work has been questioned, I’ve never handled it well. On more than one occasion, unable to let go of a direct link between doing a good job and being loved, I’ve just quit and walked away.

Over the past twenty years or so, I’ve slowly come to understand that God’s love for me has nothing—inexplicably—to do with how smart I am or how well I do my job. I discovered that in the United Church of Christ, nobody cares if I’m smart. I met Gini King and joined Centre Street Church, and I’ve learned so much about God’s love from just being around people like Phil Day, Walt Getchell, and Mary Angela Davis.

But every now and then, God insists on asking me if I’m finally willing to let go of the importance that I still place on being smart and doing a good job—and I struggle to answer that question. Every now and then, Jesus asks me if I can take one of the things most important to me—doing a good job—and kiss it goodbye, and I hesitate. I do. I know this is really hard to understand, but it has nothing to do with my ego. In fact, just the opposite. It is all about struggling to believe that I am worthy of love with no strings attached—from other people and from God.

One of the things that I’m trying hard to do a good job of right now is serving this church however I can. I am convinced that this is where God wants me to be, but I also know that the importance that I place on doing a good job, ironically, gets in the way of my following Jesus. Over the last few months, when someone misunderstands something that I’ve said, or disagrees with a decision, or seems suspicious of my motives, suddenly I’m afraid that I’m not doing a good job. That throws me into a depression, and then I find myself thinking, “Maybe I should just leave Centre Street and go somewhere else.” In other words, I’m suddenly twenty-four years old all over again.

In my saner moments, I know that the problem is not necessarily that I’m doing the wrong things—the problem is that I’m doing them for the wrong reasons. I’m trying to serve the church so that I’ll be worthy of God’s love, when actually I should be doing it because that’s what God’s calling me to do. Often I just need to get out of my own way and trust God, wholly and completely—but that’s harder than it sounds.

Luke 14:33 says, “Simply put, if you’re not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can’t be my disciple.” Being smart and doing a good job is one of the things most important to me, because I have mistakenly associated that, all of my life, with being loved, respected, and appreciated. But I feel a strong call to be a better follower of Jesus, so I’m working on this. I refuse to let this thing, that I’ve struggled with all my life, keep me from truly seeking and doing God’s will. I refuse to let it keep me from being the person that God wants me to be—a person who loves everyone and accepts love in return without conditions, without rules, without questions.

Our book group recently read *The Great Spiritual Migration*, by Brian McLaren. In that book, McLaren writes, “I realized that the reactions of my critics were not my greatest danger, nor were my critics my greatest enemies. My greatest danger lay in how I would react to my critics, and my greatest enemies were the… fear and insecurity within me… I felt tempted to give up, to look for some rock to crawl under and hide… But if I yielded to that temptation, I would slip into self-hatred, leading to depression and paralysis. And it wouldn’t be my critics who made this self-defeating choice: it would be me.”

In order to really follow Jesus, I need to get past my deeply rooted belief that my value as a person, what makes me worthy of love, has anything to do with how smart I am or how hard I work. I have let that belief limit my relationship with God, and that cannot stand.

I also need to remind myself—we all do—that Jesus never said that following him would be easy. This morning’s scripture falls in the middle section of the Gospel of Luke, in which Jesus is slowly but surely making his way toward Jerusalem and his own crucifixion. As Jesus travels from place to place, the number of people following him continues to grow, but he wants them to understand that simply walking along behind him doesn’t make them his true followers. Similarly, many people today call themselves Christians simply because their parents were Christians—not because they are trying to follow the way of Jesus in their day-to-day lives.

As Richard Rohr puts it, “Jesus’s wounds were not necessary to convince God that we were loveable; his wounds are to convince *us* of the path and the price of transformation.” And Jesus clearly warns us that following him will not always be easy. We find similar language in Matthew 10:34–37, where Jesus says to the crowds following him, “Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy. . . If you don’t go all the way with me, through thick and thin, you don’t deserve me. If your first concern is to look after yourself, you’ll never find yourself. But if you forget about yourself and look to me, you’ll find both yourself and me.”

These are tough words, a harsh warning, but Jesus knew that once he got to Jerusalem, tougher times lay ahead for them all. In the wake of his crucifixion, Jesus’s followers faced persecution and hardship, and many of them were killed because of their faith. In today’s scripture passage from Luke, and similar verses in Matthew, Jesus is sifting the crowd by presenting to them the most stringent terms of discipleship. Christian discipleship is not some theoretical, abstract ideal that has no concrete effect on our day-to-day lives—it can be serious business, a real struggle. We want the Christian life to be easy, requiring little of us, but that’s not what Jesus is describing here, as he slowly makes his way toward Jerusalem and his own death.

All my life, I have deceived myself into believing that my value as a person is based on how smart I am or how well I do my job. And when my work, or the motives behind it, have been questioned or criticized, I have often collapsed into depression and self-doubt. But that pattern is based on a lie, and it has kept me from doing the work that I know God is calling me to do.

What’s keeping you from following Jesus? What plan, or person, or belief is holding you back from doing God’s work? Jesus isn’t saying that these things shouldn’t be important to us. After all, every good thing that we have comes from God in the first place. Jesus commands us to love one another, and the best way to do that is to not let anything keep us from loving God, first and foremost, and then letting God’s love flow through us to other people.

Remember the three things that God told the Israelites back in the Book of Haggai?

1. First, remember the promises that God has made to you. God never breaks a promise.
2. Second, take courage and don’t be afraid.
3. Third, get to work. Not your own work, but God’s work.

“If you do that,” God says, “this church will be filled with my glory, and here I will give you peace.” I don’t know about you, but that sounds pretty good to me.

Dear God, make it so.