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Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on
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William Willimon tells a story about receiving a telephone call from an angry father while he was serving as Dean of the chapel at Duke University.¹ His secretary buzzed him and said that there was a man calling who was terribly upset. Willimon said, "I figured as much." He asked if it were one of his many, thought-provoking sermons that upset the man, perhaps the one where he "compared Shirley MacLaine to the Witch of Endor?" "No," his secretary said, "we haven't had any response to your sermons. . . . This man is mad over something you have done to his daughter."

Willimon was puzzled and told his secretary to put him through. The father began by saying, "I hold you personally responsible." "For what?" Willimon asked. The father replied, "My daughter. We sent her to Duke to get a good education. She is supposed to go to medical school and become a third generation [doctor]. Now she's got some fool idea in her head about Haiti, and I hold you responsible."

Turns out, his daughter was involved in the chapel, various campus causes, and was one of the organizers of a spring Mission trip to Haiti. The father said, "She has good grades and a chance to go to medical school...now this." "Now what?" Willimon said. The father shouted into the phone, "Don't act so dumb. Even if you are a preacher, you know very well *what*. Now she has some fool idea about going to Haiti for three years teaching kids there. None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for you. She likes your sermons and you've taken advantage of her at an impressionable age. Now she's got this fool idea about going to Haiti!"

At this point, Willimon said he was getting a tad energized himself. So he responded, "Now just a minute. Didn't you have her baptized?" The father replied, "Well, yes, but..." "— And," Willimon continued, "didn't you take her to Sunday School?" The father stammered in reply, "[Well, uhh] sure we did. But we never intended for it to do any damage." "Well, there you have it," Willimon said. "She was messed up before she came to us. Baptized, Sunday-schooled, called. Don't blame this on me. You're the one who started it. You should have thought about what you were doing when you had her baptized." "But," the father pleaded, "We're only Presbyterians. We just wanted her to be a good person. We never wanted anything like this." "Sorry," Willimon said, "You're talking to the wrong person. If you want to complain, take it to her third grade Sunday School teacher or your church leader. Take it up with your wife. You're the ones who got her into this when you had her baptized. Thanks. Have a nice day."

I tell this story is because I think it helps us understand our Gospel lesson where Jesus

¹ The story is found in William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, September 10, 1995

talks about the conflict that may arise within families when a person follows the call to be his disciple. It's a passage that people often classify as one "the hard sayings of Jesus." The Gospel writer tells us there's a large crowd of people following Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, and he turns to them and says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Now, the first thing to say about this passage is that I love my wife. I just want to be on the record. And just to cover all the bases I love my mother, I love my father, I love my brothers, and if I had any sisters, I'm sure that I would love them too. But I don't think Jesus, in this passage, is really talking about "hate" in the way we usually understand that word. For us, "hate" usually means that strong emotional response of aversion to someone, usually because of fear, or anger, or a feeling that we have been wronged. Most New Testament scholars don't think this is what Jesus is saying. Rather, they think that Jesus is using a bit of hyperbole to make a point about the cost of discipleship, about the demands of following him on the way of self-sacrificial love, and about how sometimes this may cause conflict within our families. It's not about hating our family, but about following Jesus. It's not about a strong emotion, but about the cost of discipleship.

The story Willimon tells is not about a young woman who hates her father. Rather, it's about a young person whose sense of call to teach children in Haiti conflicted with her father's desire for her to go to medical school. She doesn't hate her father, but she certainly upset him. It's not about her emotions, but about the cost of discipleship. The New Testament scholar Alfred Plummer describes the conflict between our natural affection for family and our allegiance to Christ this way: "In most cases the two are not incompatible; and to hate one's parents as such would be monstrous . . . But Christ's followers must be ready, if necessary, to act towards what is dearest to them as if it were an object of hatred . . . Jesus, as often, states a principle in a startling way, and leaves His hearers to find out the qualifications."²

Okay, this distinction may make this hard saying a bit easier to understand, but I'm not too sure it makes it a whole lot easier to follow. Jesus says there is a cost of discipleship. Sometimes it may involve conflict in our families. Sometimes it may involve letting go of our material possessions. Sometimes it may feel like a denial of our very selves. *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

But, here's the amazing thing. Even though there is a cost of discipleship, there is also a promise, the amazing promise that in following Christ we will find our true lives, find our truest selves. It's that paradoxical truth about discipleship that Jesus talks about over and over again. *If you seek to save your life, you will lose it, but if you lose your life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel you will find it.* It's that simple, but inexhaustible truth that by dying to self, we rise to new life, by losing our selves, we find our true selves, by giving ourselves away in love, we get our selves back again, that by walking in the way of the cross, we find it none other than the way of life and peace.

Now, there are some great examples of people who have made extraordinary sacrifices in order to follow Christ, people we sometimes refer to as saints, people who point us to the beauty and truth of discipleship by their life and witness. Here, I often think of the statues over the Great West Door at Westminster Abbey, where we find the twentieth century martyrs, extraordinary men and women who gave their lives in witness to Christ. One of these statues is of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who, as many of you know, wrote a famous book on the *Cost of Discipleship*, and who was executed for his resistance to the Nazis during the Second World

² Quoted in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (Doubleday, 1985), p. 1063

War. These saints inspire us by their life and witness and it is a good thing to remember them.

However, as inspiring as the stories of these great saints are, sometimes they are a bit overwhelming. Some of us may be called to extraordinary acts of witness and courage, but I suspect that this is not the case for many of us. Many of us are trying to manage, or juggle the real responsibilities we have to our families, our jobs, our communities, our country, and our churches. We may hear the call to costly discipleship, but we also have bills to pay, jobs to do, families to nurture, friends to visit. Many of us struggle to find a way to respond to Christ's call to costly discipleship in the midst of the realities of our every day lives.

Fred Craddock tells a funny and true story that I think may help.³ He writes, "Have you ever listened to a sermon in which the lineup of illustrations were Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, and missionaries who had their feet frozen off in the tundra of the north? As a young person sitting in church listening to those stories, I just sat there swinging my legs over the pew, and said to myself, 'It's a shame you can't be a Christian in this little town. Nobody is chasing or imprisoning or killing Christians.' Then I went away to summer camp to Bethany Hills, an inspiring time, a night of consecration around the lake, and just everything about it was so moving. We sang, 'Are Ye Able?' I went back to the dorm and lay on my bunk and said to God, 'I'm able.' 'Are you able to give your life?' 'I'll give my life,' I said, and I pictured myself running in front of a train and rescuing a child, swimming out and getting someone who was drowning. I pictured myself against a gray wall and some soldier saying, 'One last chance to deny Christ and live.' I confessed my faith, and they said, 'Ready, aim, fire.' The body slumped, the flag was at half mast, and widows were weeping in the afternoon. Later a monument is built, and people come with their cameras. 'Johnny you stand over there where Fred gave his life. Let's get your picture.'"

Craddock says, "I was sincere then, as I have been these forty-five years since. 'I give my life,' I said, but nobody warned me that I could not write one big check. I've had to write forty-five years of little checks: 87 cents, 21 cents, a dollar three cents. Just nibbled away at this giving of life."

Just nibbled away at this giving of life.

I expect this may be true for a lot of us. Giving our lives a way, a little bit at a time. Not in one big check. But rather in years and years of little checks. Teachers buying extra supplies for their kids with money from their own pockets. Pastors getting up in the middle of the night to hold the hand of someone who is dying in the hospital. Men and women volunteering their time to help tutor children after school. Parents staying up all night with a sick child. Church members making a meal and sharing it with some neighbors who are struggling with addiction. People donating money and time so kids can spend a week in camp.

I've seen all these things with my own eyes. People giving their lives a little bit at a time. People making sacrifices. People holding all the good things of this life lightly, and giving themselves away in costly service. People following Christ on the way of self-giving love: in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our churches, in our country.

Jesus said to the crowd, *Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

I wonder how this is working in your lives.

³ The story is found in Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. by Mike Grieves and Richard Ward (Chalice, 2001)

