

“Choose the hard way!” Luke 14:25-35

“Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

Have you noticed what is going on in the Church? Perhaps you have heard this not so cheerful news. The Christian faith is vanishing in the West. The Church is losing its “relevance”. And the Lutheran Church of Canada, just as almost every other Christian tradition is aging, shrinking, we are on decline, we don’t know what is going to happen in a few years’ time. And the same is true about... yes, about this little flock. Our Grace.

So, we cry out a bit with fear, a bit with desperation: “We need to, we must do something about this!” It is a wonderful, faithful Christian sentiment if we are passionate about seeing people being rescued from under the power of the darkness and being brought into the Kingdom of God’s Son.

That is the reason for our existence. And it is terrible if we are lukewarm about the great task of making disciples and being Jesus’ witnesses and proclaiming the repentance for the forgiveness of our sins. It is so sad if we are indifferent about the eternal fate of those people whom our Lord has placed in our lives.

The question is not about “whether” we need to be passionate about serving our Lord, but about “how” to participate in His mission. How to go about that whole “making disciples” business. And today’s reading from Luke gives us plentiful material to consider. Much of it is quite heavy, to put it mildly.

Let's reflect on, first, **the wrong way of making disciples**, then on **the right way of making disciples** and, finally, on **why that right way would even work**. The wrong way, the right way and why would that right way work.

The wrong way. **"Now great crowds accompanied him..."** But why were all those people there? We know from Gospel accounts that their motivation was quite diverse. Some came looking for healing, for themselves or for their loved ones. Others came looking for justice. Yet others for comfort, for help, for useful wisdom.

Different motivations. What do you think of them? Were they somewhat sinful or wrong in themselves? Not at all. Besides, they brought people to Jesus. Crowds and crowds of people. Great crowds. These motivations worked.

Now, in our desire to see more people joining our ranks, Christians are tempted to play on those different motivations. For we know they work. Just look at those churches that deliberately speak to those needs – promising health, wealth, all things good, happy life ever after. Many of them indeed do gather great crowds.

One of my fellow pastors in Australia used to be what we could call a "marketing director" for a Pentecostal church. He shared that they used to employ the same clever methods attracting people that marketing people use to sell products.

Appealing to our needs, real and imaginary. For it works. It gathers people. Jesus knew it too. This is why He was so reluctant to address those bodily needs, this is why He repeatedly warned those He had made well not to tell anyone. He knew what would happen, that people would come to Him asking to fix their problems.

That is exactly what happened. That is why Jesus with His words literally drove people away. Remember His speech recorded in John 6. When Jesus was done speaking, all the great crowds that had followed Him, who even wanted to make Him their king, left. **"This is a hard saying; [they grumbled] who can listen to it."** (John 6:60)

Why would Jesus do that? This is why - true God is not a means to our ends; He Himself is the end and fulfillment of all that we truly need. The Triune God is not a vending machine god, drop in a prayer and get your wishes granted. Your wishes! No!

The 1st Commandment does not say: "Come to this God and He will give you what you fear to lose, love and trust above everything else!" No! The 1st Commandment says that we shall fear, love and trust in this God above everything else. In this God!

That is why Jesus is so explicit about how we should gather His disciples, about **what the right way is**. Just listen to this: **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come**

after me cannot be my disciple. [...] So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.” That’s heavy, isn’t it?

How do you like it? Why would Jesus say it? All three of these sayings speak about one and the same reality. About the 1st Commandment. About fearing, loving and trusting the Triune God more than anything.

It is about our ultimate allegiance. This is, indeed, a hard saying. He asks a lot. Being a disciple of Jesus must be your core identity. Not one among many others – I am a spouse, a parent, a professional in my workplace, a star in my hobby, etc. ... and a Christian, a couple of hours on weekends. No! That is not what Jesus demands.

Being His disciple must be our core identity. It doesn’t work to be Jesus’ disciple on Sundays, and to have other identities more important in the rest of our week. Jesus demands that being His disciple should shape your entire life, everything you do.

He expects you to think this way: “How should being Jesus’ disciple shape my calling as a child to my parents? Or a sibling to my siblings? Or a spouse, or a parent, or a friend? Or a professional? How should I live in all those callings as Jesus’ disciple?” He wants you to search the Scriptures, to discuss it with fellow Christians, to inquire with your pastors, how you can live out your identity as Jesus’ disciple in all you do.

And if any of those closest people in our life demand higher allegiance to them than to the Triune God, then we must choose Jesus over them. This is serious. And most likely it is not going to be easy, and it is going to cost you.

This is why Jesus speaks about bearing our crosses. He doesn’t speak about general difficulties and challenges of this life, but about those which you will incur as you try to faithfully follow Jesus. It may cost you your relationships with the closest people, it may cost you friendships, it may cost you career opportunities. It may cost you real money. One thing is clear - there will be a cost if you want to be Jesus’ disciple.

It is not an easy thing. This is why Jesus tells those three parables. About the building of the tower, about the waging war and about being a good salt. They all are to illustrate how serious a calling being a Jesus’ disciple is.

Do you have what it takes? Are you committed enough? Are you ready to devote your time, energy, thoughts following your Master, taking in what He teaches, learning in Divine Service, in Bible Classes, in your home devotions, and applying it in your life, supporting your fellow saints, praying for their needs, supporting the cause of the Gospel, dying to yourself and living for Jesus? Are you committed to follow Jesus?

That is a lot, and this, according to Jesus, is the right way of making His disciples. Sounds much harder than the first option. No doubt. Nevertheless, even as Jesus drove away most of His followers with His harsh demands, those who came for the right

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reasons remained and now two millennia later there are hundreds of millions of saints who follow Jesus, from every nation, tribe and language. **One should wonder, why would such a hard and challenging invitation work?** The answer is simple.

Because Jesus doesn't ask of us anything that He Himself hasn't done for us, for you. He, the eternal Son of God left His divine glory, He left His loving Father's presence, He humbled Himself, He took on our flesh. God became man. One of us.

He was rejected by His earthly family, He was disowned and abandoned by His closest disciples, when it mattered most. He was left alone, when He needed help more than ever. But nothing could shake His commitment, His allegiance to us.

He loved us, He loved you, more than Himself. He not only bore His cross in some metaphorical way, paying the prices of rejection and hatred, but He also literally went to the cross, to suffer and die. He didn't have to; He didn't deserve for that to happen.

But He took our place, our sins, He paid the price for everything wrong that humankind has done and will do. He paid the price for every time when we are ashamed of His name, for every time we value worldly goods more than our God.

He paid the price for every time we fail to love one another as He loves us, for every time we fail to forgive or ask for forgiveness, for every time we are lukewarm, useless salt, no good for anything, bringing shame to His name with our actions or lack of them. He received what we justly deserve. And He didn't turn away from His mission. He valued us more than anything.

Now He calls you, come and follow me, be my disciple! And even if on a surface level it may sound like a challenging calling, it is full of joy. Jesus really isn't asking to give up something more for something less. It is the other way around.

Everything we have in this life are gifts of our generous God, He is the Giver. Now He simply calls us to love and trust Him more than the gifts He has given us, not to have our allegiance to His gifts, but to the Giver. All those gifts, even the most precious, come and go, they belong to this age that perishes. Our Lord, His faithfulness to you and the life that He has prepared for His disciples, will never come to an end.

And even now in this age He promises that **"everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life."** (Matt 19:29) That's it.

May the Holy Spirit enlighten us and help us to see **the right way of being Jesus' disciples** and making Jesus' disciples and may the Triune God Himself grant you His presence and help and fill you with divine joy, as we strive to follow Him.

Amen.