

There's a Cost?

September 5, 2010 Firelands Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 18:1-11 Psalm 139 Philemon 1-21 Luke 14:25-33

Sometime in the last couple of weeks, on some of my friends' Facebook pages, a link to a CNN story started showing up. The title was "More Teens Becoming 'Fake' Christians." Well, that's a title that's going to intrigue us ministerial types, so I read it. And I found it disturbing, on a whole bunch of levels.

The story talks about a book by a Princeton professor named Kenda Creasy Dean, a book called *Almost Christian*. Professor Dean conducted a huge study of American teenagers and found that many of the teenagers who called themselves Christian actually embrace what she calls "moralistic therapeutic deism." In other words, "a watered-down faith that portrays God as a 'divine therapist' whose chief goal is to boost people's self-esteem."¹

God as a divine therapist whose goal is to boost our self-esteem? God **does** want us to feel good about ourselves, I'm sure. But where in the texts this morning can we find the idea that our self-esteem is God's chief goal?

"Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? Says the Lord. ... Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings" (Jeremiah 18:4, 11).

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (Luke 14:26, 33).

I don't know about you, but those verses don't make **me** feel all warm and fuzzy.

So how did teenagers get to this watered-down faith? Dean says that pastors and parents are equally to blame. "Some adults," the CNN story said, "don't expect much from youth pastors. They simply want them to keep their children off drugs and away from premarital sex."

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/08/27/almost.christian/index.html>

Others practice a 'gospel of niceness,' where faith is simply doing good and not ruffling feathers. The Christian call to take risks, witness and sacrifice for others is muted."²

And that's where this story really started to disturb me. Because I recognized those folks who practice a faith that's about doing good and not ruffling feathers. I've been one of them from time to time. And I imagine you have too.

And when we're in that "gospel of niceness" mode, we read this morning's text from Luke with dismay. Jesus says we have to hate our families? What? That could ruffle some feathers! Jesus says we'd better figure out what this being Christian is going to cost us before we commit? What? What do you mean, there's a cost?

That's not a bad question, actually. Isn't salvation—being saved from the dominion of death and fear—supposed to be a free gift, a gift out of God's grace, not dependent on anything we can do? Yes!

And wasn't part of Jesus dying on the cross the cost of justification—forgiveness of our sins—for all of us—free to us and not dependent on anything we can do? Yes!

Okay, there are two big theological words—salvation and justification—but we're actually dealing with a third one here: sanctification.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism explains sanctification as "the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed ... after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness" (Q.35).

In other words, sanctification is the Christian journey—our becoming more and more like God—our being more and more "right with God"—righteous. We do not need to become righteous in order to receive God's gifts of salvation and justification. But Christ calls us to follow him, to become more and more like him, to become more and more righteous. And that's the gift of sanctification.

When we first come to know God and Jesus, we are in a sense "raw" Christians. We are Christians, yes, through God's amazing grace. But it is in our following Christ, in our walk with God, that God sanctifies us. Sanctification **is** a gift from God—a gift that we get to participate in.

And it is that discipleship walk that Jesus calls us to in this text from Luke. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes,

² Ibid.

and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” The word translated as “hate” here doesn’t mean to despise in the same way it does in English. It’s more of an action than an emotion. It’s more like Jesus is saying, “Whoever comes to me and refuses to give up their overarching moral, cultural and economic ties to their family—whoever continues to set ties to family above me—that person cannot be my disciple.”

Remember that the family was the centerpiece of life in the Greco-Roman world. It was a person’s cultural, religious, economic, and relational context. Everything one did revolved around the family—bringing the family either honor (by doing what was right in the family’s eyes) or shame (by doing something the family didn’t agree with).

Jesus is saying, “Folks, if you want to be my disciple, you’ve got to accept that it’s a *whole new world out there*. *There are risks. Your family may feel that you are shaming them. The world as you know it may pull you to do things differently than I do. Your family may say, “We need a bigger house,” when I say, Go, and don’t even take a second coat. Your culture may say, “You should find a job where you can make a lot of money,” when I say, “Sell all your possessions.” Your friends may urge you to get even when someone does you wrong, when I say, “Turn the other cheek.” And that family, that culture, those friends, that world as you know it—they’re not going to be happy with you when you don’t follow their direction.*

This is exactly the situation around the letter to Philemon. Paul is writing to his good friend Philemon, a fellow Christian—his “dear friend and co-worker”—and to others in Philemon’s house church as well. Paul is writing because one Onesimus, a slave belonging to Philemon, has come to be living with Paul. We don’t know the circumstances under which Onesimus came to Paul, but there’s a hint in the letter that Onesimus ran away from Philemon to come to Paul, who is currently in prison.

Now, according to the culture and laws of the day, it was illegal for anyone to keep a slave belonging to someone else. And when an owner recovered a slave who had run away, the owner had the right to punish the slave in any way he saw fit—up to and including killing him.

But during the time Onesimus has been with Paul, he has become a Christian himself. And even though his name, Onesimus, means “useless,” he has become more than simply useful to Paul. Paul loves him. Onesimus is his heart, he writes.

And so Paul writes to his dear friend Philemon and asks him to go against the expectations of his culture and his people—to accept Onesimus back with no punishment, “no longer as a slave,” Paul writes, “but more than a slave, a beloved brother.”

Now, this was simply not done in those times. Can't you imagine Philemon's friends and family saying to him, “You can't just take this guy back. You've got to punish him! What kind of precedent are you setting for the rest of your slaves if they think they can run away and not suffer any consequences?” We don't actually know what Philemon **did** with Onesimus. But we know what his challenge was.

Did you notice that when Paul talked about Philemon welcoming Onesimus as a beloved brother, he didn't **order** him to do so. Paul wanted Philemon's “good deed to be voluntary and not something forced.”

That's what God does with us. God does not **force** us to follow him. God invites us, so that our walk with him is voluntary. But Jesus also warns us that this walk is not something we can do without paying attention. It's a walk that may well ruffle some feathers here and there, a walk that may put us in conflict with our families and our communities.

It's a call to something real. A real relationship with God, a real following of Christ.

And do you know what? When we live our lives that way, when our Christian faith is more than simply doing good and not ruffling feathers, when we hear the call of the gospel beyond “niceness,” when we are not *almost Christian* but truly followers of Christ, when we carry the cross, people notice. Teenagers notice, and children notice, and adults notice.

And when we do all that, when we live our lives not as Americans first or Republicans first or Democrats first ... or parents or grandparents or daughters or sons first ... when we live our lives first as Christ's disciples, our reward is joy, and peace, and love.

My friends, let us carry the cross and follow Jesus.

Amen.