

What is the Cost?

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September 4, 2016

There are little minions that live inside my Facebook page who dredge up my posts and photos from the past to present to me as memories I might want to share. A kind of “this day in history” feature, but one with much less gravitas than such a feature on TV or the radio about D-Day or the invention of the steam engine or the quest for women’s suffrage. My days in history might feature a video of a cat riding a Roomba or a photo of our (now deceased) pet bunny. Sometimes I am amused, and sometimes I am distressed, by what I was doing two or four or seven years ago today.

Not of all my memories are of the lighter variety. I know I will be confronted soon by a post from the September day when Tom and I moved out of our home of 25 years in Atlanta. Despite the joy of my life here now, moving out of the home where we raised our children was tough. It was even tougher on Tom, who stayed behind for four more years after I came to Virginia.

Still, Tom told me that something interesting happened when the movers took away all the furniture. He said that he stood there in the completely empty house and felt almost weightless and ridiculously free. No stuff. No clutter. Nothing that needed his attention. No attachments. Free.

Of course, that didn’t last long. Our stuff was successfully relocated and we live among it all again. But that was a telling moment, I think. Can you think of a time yourself when you felt ridiculously free? Even if just for a little while?

The things Jesus says in the Gospel today are hard to hear. What does he mean, hate your family? Take up your cross? Sell everything you own, or you can’t be his disciple? No wonder his followers began to desert him. No wonder people wanted to push him off a cliff. God is love and Jesus embodies that love, but this is definitely tough love. If you just read this passage by itself, you might wonder why you would even want to be his disciple.

But if we can get past our initial shock or distaste, Jesus’ admonitions are of vital importance. Not because if we don’t do them we won’t get into heaven. Jesus is never about earning salvation - that is a gift already given. They are vitally important because following Jesus is about having abundant life and we often are not able to have abundant life because we are too busy and burdened and our life is too cluttered and obligated elsewhere to experience it.

Jesus is saying, look, there is a cost to discipleship, and it is a high cost, so think hard about it, really think it through.

But this is not a dire warning; it is more a loving reminder.

We know that life can be hard. Suffering is real. Stuff is going to happen that leaves us devastated. And when it does, being surrounded by possessions that demand all our attention will not save us.

Withdrawing from the world and circling our family wagon diminishes us. A determination to avoid suffering only leads to suffering, as Thomas Merton said, and a life held captive to fear.

Perhaps another way to look at it, then, is not “what is the cost of discipleship” but “what is the cost of not being a disciple?” Of asking “what is the cost of surrounding myself with possessions I have to serve and tend?” Am I to be tamed and domesticated by things? And “what is the cost of making an idol of family so that I have no energy or room for others or to be open to God’s call on me?” “What is the cost - to us as individuals and as a society - of only looking out for ourselves and spending too much of our time on simple distractions and amusements?”

And here’s a big one: “what is the cost of trying to avoid pain and suffering?” I believe that cost is a life of numbness and alienation, of doing everything we can to only live on the surface.

Just living on the surface is not abundant life. Jesus, as we see through his own example, asks us to look outside ourselves and care for our world and for God’s people. And Jesus also asks us to look inside ourselves and recognize our need for authentic connection and our hunger for meaning. Jesus asks us to live large in the world, instead of living small, and to be ready to follow even to places we never knew existed and experience what we never imagined.

It is only Jesus who says, I can give you real life, not just life on the surface. I can give you unconditional love and acceptance. I can give you heaven. And my life - all of my life, including my suffering and also my resurrection - will prove it. I am the way to real life. So love me more than things. Love me more than you love even your family. Accept and embrace suffering - your own, your friends’ and family’s, the world’s - and you will find transformation.

And this is why Jesus’ words are a loving reminder. Because if you can’t let go, if you can’t embrace suffering, if you make idols of your family, you will never be really and truly free to follow where God is calling you or to be love in the world or to see where that love is needed to be put into action. You will not be free of that which drags you down and uses up your precious time. You will never be free to change the world.

In a similar story in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gathers the people together to say to them, look, God has brought you safely out of Egypt, out of captivity. Yeah, you whined a lot about it, too, wishing you had better food and comfy beds. But you have been given your freedom by the God who loves you despite the whining. Now God is about to lead you into the Promised Land. And God has given you some laws to follow, and some of them are pretty tough. But they are given in order that you - individually and as the people of God - might have life. Not killing other people is going to give you life. Not coveting what others have, not being eaten up by jealousy and envy, is going to give you life. Observing the Sabbath is not a deprivation but something to give you life. So, Moses said, choose this day what it's going to be. And I hope you will choose life.

Sometimes we don't even know that we are being held captive by our attachments. We're just going along, perhaps with a vague feeling that our energies are misplaced, that we might be watching too many cats on Roombas, a feeling that we have so often that it seems normal. The experience my husband had in the empty house made us realize how rare it is to feel ridiculously free. He knew he was going to have furniture again. He knew he wasn't about to become destitute. But even though his favorite sofa was gone, it felt really good to feel free.

Today Jesus is asking us to choose what is life-giving, to let go of what discourages us from engaging fully in the abundance of God. By asking us to focus on the divine life, he is offering to set us free - and not just free FROM stuff, but FREE TO live a bigger, deeper, richer, more meaningful life and to be what we were made to be: examples of life-giving love in a world that needs nothing more, and nothing more desperately.