

Scripture introduction:

Jeremiah: 18: 1-11

First scripture is a vision given to Jeremiah that is bad news and good news- bad news in that God is going to break down what is not working as it should, and good news that God is going to remake and rebuild the people of Israel to be faithful to God's covenant with them.

(read it)

Luke 14: 25 - 33

Our second scripture from Luke is also bad news and good news. Jesus tells us that to be his disciples we must give up everything-

We will hear what is referred to as one of the "hard" sayings of Jesus, that to be his disciple we must "hate" our families. Most of us, when we hear this, we say, "he can't possibly mean that- after all Jesus teaches love not hate, even love of enemies- this has to mean something different from what it seems to mean."

- There may be a language issue here: Semitic languages do not have gradations of liking- there are only the extreme words "love" and "hate"-
- Matthew, when he translates the same words of Jesus into Greek, clarifies the intention for a Greek audience who are not familiar with the Semitic extreme language:
- HE says to be Jesus disciple we must love Jesus more than family. it's not a matter of hating our nearest and dearest, it's a matter of priorities. Jesus, God, is to be our first love.
- It may also help to know what was going on when Luke wrote his gospel about 72 AD. Jewish Followers of Jesus were being thrown out of the synagogue, and shunned by their families- There were dire consequences for saying "Jesus is Lord". So early Christians were having to make a very real choice.
- And Jesus is simply saying, know the cost you may be called to pay for following me, and decide NOW whether you're prepared to go through with it.
- That is the bad news, faith is costly. The good news is that for those who are willing to pay the cost, faith becomes very valuable.

Let us hear then what Luke says about the cost of discipleship.

“A faith that is worth something” Sep 9, 07 Luke 14: 25 – 33
Jeremiah (potter’s wheel)

My first date was SOO embarrassing. I was 14/ 15 years old, he was a year or two older, and was taking me out to dinner. I knew nothing about anything. Least of all ordering food at a restaurant- Our family never ate out, that I remember...perhaps I ordered something expensive, I wouldn’t have known, but it came to the end of the meal and turned out he didn’t have enough money to pay.

Have you ever been there- maybe in a grocery store, and you have to start taking items out of your cart- it’s embarrassing when we can’t pay.

Jesus warns the crowds following him that they may find that they don’t have what it takes to be his followers. They will have to turn aside from the path they’ve begun, and they’ll be embarrassed.

And in the middle east nothing is more important than face saving, honour.

Jesus uses the example of a man who builds a tower. He only gets as far as digging the foundation and he runs out of money. Instead of a monument to his power and status, there is a ridiculous hole in the ground, a monument to his shame.

You’d NEVER start building a tower if you didn’t have the wherewithal to complete it. And if you were a king and an army was coming against you, you wouldn’t just plunge into battle. You’d CALCULATE whether you had a chance of winning. And if it was clear that you were going to get whipped, you’d go and make peace- you wouldn’t want to be embarrassed.

So, he says, if you follow me and you can’t see it through, you’re going to be embarrassed.

Jesus doesn’t seem to care how MANY people follow him; what he cares about is that he has people he can depend on, people who are in for the long haul.

I think of Ghandi when he was rallying the people to join him in passive resistance against the British occupation of India. He needed people who had the strength and determination to be beaten and not retaliate. He said if people were to join him, they had to be angry- if they weren’t angry they wouldn’t have the discipline, the passion, to be able to endure, to not “lose it” and lash out at their oppressor. He wanted people who would stay the path of passive resistance to the end.

Jesus wants people who are prepared mentally and spiritually- who know what lies up ahead , who won't be surprised and dismayed when hardship comes, and so turn aside.

One of the highlights of my summer was a visit with my brother in Gibraltar. One evening we met a Gibraltarian who told us of a lovely walk we could do around the rock, starting from "Jews' Gate".- It took her about 40 minutes she said, she did it at least 3 times a week.

Well, we discovered that the starting point, "Jews' Gate", was halfway up the rock (I don't BELIEVE she mentioned this). No matter. We had the whole day. And gaily we set off on a pathway from "Jews Gate". Turned out to be a birder's path- with little cement huts, lookout points on the way. Lloyd would have loved this.

Wonderful view of the ocean. Fairly tough because it was rocky. 40 minutes, and we didn't seem to be arriving anywhere. We'd imagined that we would arrive at the top of the rock. We started to wonder if we were on the right path. We kept wondering if we should we turn back and look for another path.

After an hour or more, we reached some steps- NOT like the CHURCH steps, - just large chunks of rock, with a rope on one side for support, heading upwards, pretty steeply. We thought, we must be near the end- this just takes us up to the top of the rock.

After 15 minutes of zig zag climbing, we wondered more emphatically whether we were on the wrong trail- no one could do this walk in 40 minutes, and most certainly if you did it on Wednesday you were not going to say, right, I'll do this again on Friday.

We weren't sure whether we'd ever see another Friday! Turned out that the Mediterranean Steps, as they were called, consisted of 600 of these rocky steps. This couldn't have been the path the woman took !

Jesus didn't want anyone who followed him to be wondering if they were on the right path. So he makes it very clear to them what they will encounter. They will suffer rejection, even from their family, so before they start, they must DECIDE if they are willing to let go of their family.

They will suffer persecution, , so before they start, they must DECIDE if they are willing to endure torture and death. Are they willing to give up everything?

They need to know what the road up ahead will bring, so that they are able to persevere, and will not be embarrassed at being one of those who fall away.

Do we sometimes wonder whether we are on the right faith journey?

When our prayers seem not to be answered, when tragedy strikes, when it is clear that there is no special protection afforded us or our loved ones, do we sometimes ask the question- “so, is there any point to my faith? Have I been on the wrong road all this time?”

When others, sometimes our nearest and dearest, despise us, because we go to church, because we believe in God, because we foolishly give our money away to others in need, because we maybe refuse to engage in a less than honest business deal, whatever,

we need to know that this is the cost that Jesus speaks of, that others will reject and mock us, and that we are on the intended path.

Our church mission statement says that we are here “to equip with faith.” We aim to equip people for the journey of discipleship- so that we will have the spiritual and personal resources to endure and persevere. To have, as Paul says, the mind of Christ, because this is what we need to be able to follow Jesus, to do as Jesus did.

And what is it that Jesus showed us to do? His whole life and being was about emptying himself, throwing himself away, squandering himself for love.

He came into the world through a process of self emptying, leaving behind divinity and becoming human; his journey here was a downward one:

He kept fellowship with the despised, the outcast, the lowly, the broken, and he left this world through self emptying, through a seemingly useless squandering of his young life- allowing himself to be crucified offering no resistance.

This is the picture of the one whom we follow: someone who is not climbing the ladder of success, but who is heading downwards constantly-

It’s not an attractive picture. On the surface. And yet, for those who follow in this way, there is a curious joy.

This summer my son officially moved out of his basement room in my house. We agreed his bed was fit only for garbage and we moved it out of the basement to the back of the house, and brought my bed down to the basement. I purchased a NEW bed.

I bought the mattress and the headboard at different stores. The mattress salesman told me that the delivery men would NOT attach my headboard to the bed frame. And that they would NOT remove an old mattress from

anywhere other than the place they were putting the new one- Insurance issues.

I understood, so, when the delivery men arrived, I had no expectations. There were three of them, very fit, strong, efficient men, who despite the 40 degree humidex factor that day, appeared to be making a sport of racing through the delivery process.

But to my surprise, the first young man, who came into the bedroom, saw the head board on the side, and asked me if I needed it attached to the frame. "Ooh, yes," I said, "I'd love it, if you could do that!"

He said to HIM it was no problem. Though the others might object. He'd ask them, he said. He had a mother and a mother in law, and he knew this would be difficult for me to do.

As I was leaving the room, I heard him asking he the others, and I heard their answer, "no way, man". But when I went back up, there they all were attaching the head board- he must have said something that swayed them.

Now my son, he's such a good guy- he'd come in specially to move all the stuff the delivery men wouldn't move- and he mentioned to this same man about the mattress out back- could they take it away And again the man said they couldn't do that and that the other men for sure wouldn't.

But he added that HE would be glad to- he said, he was different from the others. He never said he was a Christian, he just said he was different. He liked to help. The phrase he used was "I work from my heart".

There was something very touching about those words, "I work from my heart", and the way he never asked the other guys, he just went out back by himself and on his own, heaved the old mattress and box spring down the driveway and onto the truck.

I could sense the other guys mocking him, but he didn't seem to care. I didn't ask him if he was a Christian. I somehow assumed that he was-- I couldn't think why else he would behave that way. Or perhaps he was a good Muslim.

The thing he is he operated according to a different mindset. He lived and worked out of a different consciousness- he bent the rules, but not as most people do, for his own benefit. Rather he took a risk in bending rules, for the sake of being of service to others.

There was something very Christ- like about that. I think of Jesus healing on the Sabbath, touching lepers, teaching women, throwing out money

lenders....There was something inspiring about this man's action, that made me want to do the same. To work from my heart.

I believe that this is a desire in all of us- to live and to work for something, someone beyond ourselves. That this is what gives our life meaning. To serve in a costly way. In a Christ like way.

Professor William Willimon tells of a recruiter who came to Duke University from the Teach America Program.

She began by saying, "I don't really know why I am here to night. I can tell just by looking at you that you are probably uninterested in what I have to say. This is one of the best universities in America. You are all successful. That is why you are here, to become an even greater success on Madison Avenue, or Wall Street, or in Law School.

And here I stand, looking for people who want to go into a burned out classroom in Watts and teach Biology. I'm looking for somebody to go into a little one-room school house in West Virginia and teach kids from six years to thirteen years old how to read.

We had three teachers killed last year in their classrooms! And I can tell, just by looking at you, that none of you want to throw away your lives on anything like that. ."

The response to her talk was overwhelming- All the students jumped up, rushed into the aisles, down to the front, starting fighting over her pamphlets, just dying to apply for Teach America.

Willimon says, that that night he learned that people are hungry to give their lives to something more important than themselves. And are sometimes willing to pay the cost.

That there is a cost in following Jesus is not such bad news. It says that faith and the way of faith is valuable. Persecuted churches around the world thrive because people know how valuable their faith is.

Many of us WANT to give our lives in service, in a costly way, if we thought we COULD. Some of those in the crowd around Jesus that day DID choose to follow Jesus in his way. Yet even they found, when it came to the crunch, that they couldn't go through with the cross bearing part.

They had to wait - for God to send the Holy Spirit upon them, and THEN they had the strength to endure.

To walk so costly a path we need the power of the Holy Spirit. There is a very simply way in which we can invite God's Spirit to fill us, and shape us into vessels of God's light and grace.

It's called centering prayer, where we center on God, on Jesus as our first love.

The image of centering is taken from the potter's wheel- the one in Jeremiah, where God desires to remake us. If we place a lump of clay on the wheel and we don't center it, then the vessel we make will collapse. If our lives are not centered in God, we will be a weak vessel.

There are words that we can use to center ourselves in God. Some people repeat just one word- Jesus, Jesus. In our worship folder we have printed three possible centering prayers- based on the Trinity. I've taken them from the book, *Simply Christian*, that the course we're offering is based on.

The first one is sometimes known as the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner"

I like the second: "Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, set up your kingdom in our midst"

And the third: "Holy Spirit, Breath of the living God, renew me and all the world."

These prayers are intended to be repeated over and over and over. I would invite you to memorise at least one of them and try it out during the week-

We can pray it at odd moments when we're needing to become focused, strengthened- maybe-we're waiting for someone to arrive for a meeting, or we're walking to the subway, or showering, or whatever-

These prayers are a way of centering our lives in God, and so inviting God like a potter to remake us and empower us to be disciples who endure.

During the prayer time that follows the hymn, Lloyd will lead us in prayer, and when he says the words, Lord Jesus Christ, we're all to join in with the rest of the Jesus prayer, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

When he says, Father Almighty, we join in with the rest of THAT prayer, and when he says Holy Spirit, we join in with THAT prayer.

So let us now invite God's Spirit to work in us and through us, to remake us and mold us into the kind of people who are strong and enduring in following in Jesus Way, Let us pray this hymn,

"Spirit of the living God," #