

Christ in Crisis: Where are the Disciples?

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Matthew 16:21-28 (CEB)

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and legal experts, and that he had to be killed and raised on the third day. Then Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him: "God forbid, Lord! This won't happen to you." But he turned to Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are a stone that could make me stumble, for you are not thinking God's thoughts but human thoughts."

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives? For the Human One is about to come with the majesty of his Father with his angels. And then he will repay each one for what that person has done. I assure you that some standing here won't die before they see the Human One coming in his kingdom."

Over the past two months, Mary and I have sought to highlight some of the challenges or you might even say crisis that is happening in Christianity right now.

As I have been pondering and praying over the sermon this morning I was trying to figure out how to articulate --- in a way that doesn't push your off button --- the challenges that we face today as followers of Jesus.

Because, Christianity is under siege --- but not in the ways that we often think.

It is not under siege by shop owners and workers who will say Happy Holidays rather than Merry Christmas in the next few months.

It is under siege because we have neglected our responsibility

 We have disconnected our private life from our religious life

 Our work life from our religious life

 And the one that will set some of you off

 Our political life from our religious life

We have compartmentalized our Christianity to an hour or two a week

 We have also made it about a personal relationship with Jesus

 As if we can be in relationship with Jesus in isolation

I came across an interesting illustration of this.

Are any of you familiar with Paxos or Paxi Greece

It is a tiny Island with a population of about 2500 people

Yet it boasts some 64 churches

That is one church for every 40 people

It is not that the people of Paxos are particularly pious

Instead, there is a tradition there for every island family to build their own little church.

These family churches are used for family occasions --- births, baptisms, weddings and funerals --- and for very little else.

It creates a very personal or almost private religion.

A religion divorced from society.

And in my mind, we have done the same thing.

Religion and Christianity has become increasing private

Certainly, we want there to be a church with clergy, organ and choir (that has been part of the challenge during the pandemic)

and we want it there for those special occasions

baptism

weddings

funerals

And there are also those who on the face of it are more committed to their Christian walk.

But they do not want to be bothered with actually engaging with the community at large --- They will support financially helping people, but are not really interested in the soup kitchen or volunteering at the community center

We desire the church to make us feel good in our relationship with God and to be there when we have a need like a

baptism

wedding

funeral

This is nothing new

83 years ago, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the still classic exposition on what it means to be a Disciple of Jesus.

In The Cost of Discipleship or as it is also known simply as Discipleship, Bonhoeffer looked out at his beloved Germany and saw a nation, not that unlike our own.

Bonhoeffer saw a nation filled with decent, hardworking, responsible citizens.

But what bothered him was he also saw how powerless the people had become to resist the evil attraction of Hitler and his ghastly fascist creed.

What shocked him the most was how Christianity had offered very little opposition and often seemed to justify Hitler's actions.

Nearly everyone had fallen under the spell of Hitler, who promised to restore Germany and the German people to their rightful place.

Bonhoeffer concluded that the reason why the people did not resist Hitler is because they had bought into the notion of what he called CHEAP GRACE

They no longer saw that caring for the least and lost was important
Instead their own personal relationship with God was what mattered

Cheap grace for Bonhoeffer means:

the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Bonhoeffer calls us to let go of this cheap grace and instead to embrace the costly grace that Jesus offers.

And he wants to remind us that we do not set the terms of the relationship with Jesus --- God does.

That is why it is costly.

He writes:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

For Bonhoeffer, the answer to what is required of us to be a disciple of Jesus is found in the beatitudes. There he saw it all laid out.

Care for the hungry

Care for those who are oppressed

Care for those who are disenfranchised

Be filled with mercy towards others

Have a pure heart

Be a peacemaker

Persist

And Jesus constantly reminds us that we must:

"take up {our} cross, and follow {him}. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will find them. Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? What will people give in exchange for their lives?"

It is easy to follow the path of "cheap grace" to either:

Define religion on our own terms

to make it meet our needs and whims

or

to retreat from a costly witness and discipleship in the world and into a private religion

Jesus wants to impact every moment of our lives --- not just part of it.

Being a disciple is a full time relationship --- one cannot be a disciple for just part of the day --- one chooses to either follow or not.

And while I see the Beatitudes defining how a disciple is to live and relate to the world; for me it is at the end of Matthew's gospel where Jesus makes it plain what life with Christ is to be like. This is Jesus last message before he enters Jerusalem --- where he will be arrested, tried and killed by the state

The people hearing this story all think of themselves as followers of Jesus --- as disciples. And he seems rather judgmental to those followers.

Jim Wallis writes:

This is the final test. This was Jesus' last teaching before he went into Jerusalem to be crucified and raised from the dead. This is how we measure our lives as disciples. And while Jesus was not very judgmental as a whole during his ministry, he was in this text. The sheep go to eternal reward, and the goats, who didn't treat the vulnerable the way they would treat Jesus, literally go to eternal damnation.

Listen to Jesus' words.

Matthew 25:31-46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing?"

And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Jim Wallis continues:

An important thing to remember about this story is that all the people who are being judged think they are Jesus' followers. They all thought they belonged to him and they say, "when did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, a stranger in prison? We didn't know it was you!"

And I often like to add that if this story happened in the present day, they'd add, "Had we known it was you, we would have at least formed a social action committee." The way Jesus responds to them couldn't be clearer. He tells them, "How you treat those who are the least of these," meaning the marginal, the put aside, the shutout, the ignored, the neglected — "that's how you treat me. So I'll know how much you love me by how you treat them."

Over the past two months, we have looked at the crisis of Christianity in North America today.

Who is our neighbor?

Do we see the Christ in everyone?

What is truth?

What is required of power?

God does not want us to be paralyzed by fear

Who is our Caesar?

Becoming a peacemaker and not a peacekeeper

And finally --- are we willing to be a disciple

Will we care for the least, the lost and the last in our society?

I want to close with this prayer from Christine Jarrett

We name you gracious Master and our God,

Great Redeemer and King.

You offer us the kingdom, Lord Jesus;

a realm where the hungry are fed,

the thirsty are given something to drink;

and the homeless are housed.

You offer us a realm where

*those who are shivering are clothed,
the sick are visited,
those in prison hear good news.*

*We wonder how we are to receive such a gift:
Will you require of us more than what we are already doing?
Will you judge us for what we have done
and what we have left undone?
Will you leave us out of your community of salvation?*

*In your great love and mercy,
move us beyond fear;
move us beyond guilt;
move us beyond our anxious worry.
Move us deeper into your surprising grace;
Heal the blindness that does not see you
when you come to us in distressing disguise.*

Set us free from serving lesser gods.

*Most of all, form in us the mind of Christ,
so that we see the world through your eyes,
so that our hearts are broken by the things
that break your heart, and
so that we delight in the things that delight you,
and you create in us courage enough not to duck.*

We ask in your life-giving name. Amen