

September 4, 2022
Jeremiah 18:1-11
Luke 14:25-33

Shaped by Jesus

Jesus says, it's a big decision if you decide to follow me. You'll leave behind the ways of the world. The pursuit of money or possessions or power. You might even have to leave behind your close friends and family. If you follow me, it will cost you a lot. It will cost you your safety and your certainty and your popularity. If you follow me, you will carry the cross. And you should know this, so you can decide. So you can decide if this is for you or not. Do the numbers. Add it up. Unless you are willing to risk everything, even your family, even life itself; you cannot follow me.

Jesus has hard words for us today. Difficult words. If we want to be his disciples, we must know where this is headed. We must know Jesus is going to the cross. And if we want to follow him, we must follow him there and let go of everything else. If we want to be his disciples, we must choose to do so. We shouldn't do it on a whim. Or take it lightly. We must know what will happen if we let his radical mercy shape us. If we believe the humble will be exalted and the least will be the greatest.

If obey Jesus' words, it will change us. And it will cost us. It will cost us our comfort. It will cost us our blindness and ignorance to the hurt around us. It will cost us family and friends who don't agree with us. It will lead to conflict, Jesus says. It will lead to the cross. So follow me at your own risk. Because love like this will cost you.

Jesus wants his disciples to understand. He wants them to know what is about to happen. He wants them to know that it will be hard. And he doesn't want them to quit in the middle of it and throw in the towel. He is like the coaches at my son's football practices, who are always reminding the players of how important their commitment is. The coaches expect hard work from the team. They expect everyone's best effort. And if you don't give it, then you have to run laps. Jesus is telling his disciples he expects them to give everything they've got. He expects them to put the team first. If you are with me, Jesus says, you've got to be with me all the way.

Jesus is trying to separate his true followers from the people who were just following him around. He had crowds of people with him. A great big entourage. And some were curious, some suspicious, some hopeful,

some desperate. All of them were watching and waiting and wondering what he would do next. But Jesus knew that the cross was next.

Suffering was next. And Jesus didn't want crowds of fans and onlookers. He wanted disciples. He wanted people who would follow him and leave everything else behind; who would commit to him; who would die and be reborn with him.

Jesus wanted disciples who weren't afraid of endings, who could hope in what they couldn't see and trust God's to handle it. He wanted disciples who could change and grow and mature. The best leaders help us do that. They take us and our expectations, and our old wobbly thoughts, and shape us into something new. Just like the potter shaping clay in our story from Jeremiah. The potter knows how to work with the clay, how to make something with it. And she knows how to remake it if it gets dented or crooked. She knows how to smoosh it down and start again. It's the end of one pot and the beginning of another one.

Destruction and re-construction. Death and re-birth.

Faithfulness and obedience to God can bring us to the end of things. It can mean change and disassembly and rearrangement. God tells the

prophet Jeremiah that the people of Israel need to be remade. They cannot stay the way they are. War is imminent. The armies of Babylon are on their doorstep. The people have been ignoring them for too long going about their business, worshipping other gods, overlooking injustice, paying no attention to the poor; pretending everything was fine. But Jeremiah tells the people they have a responsibility. That now is their chance to start again. “Turn from evil, he says! Amend your ways and your doings! You are the people of God. Not the people of foreign idols. Not the people of Baal and Asherah, of war and fertility and power and wealth. You are the people of God, the people of freedom from slavery, the people of hope for the hopeless.

The prophet Jeremiah’s words are words for the kings and priests and leaders, the people of Judah and Jerusalem, the people in the Temple and the palaces. It’s as if Jeremiah calling out the Vatican or the leaders in Washington DC. Telling them to shape up. That they have forgotten who they are and what is important. And that God will need to take everything apart and remake it. “Repent,” he says. “Amend your ways. Stop worshipping false gods. Put your hope in the Creator of heaven and

earth who loves justice and mercy for the widow and the orphan. Put your hope in the one who brought you out of Egypt to the Promised Land.”

Jeremiah calls the people to change. But it’s hard when you are used to life the way it is. Even if the change would be a good thing. We are afraid of the unknown. So we stay at the terrible job. In the abusive relationship. In the broken family system. In the church that no longer speaks to us. With the friends who are stuck in racism and bigotry. We stay because the alternative is the end. And something seems better than nothing. But a crisis can change all of that. An accident, an incident. An unexpected diagnosis. The sudden loss of a job or a career dream. The tragic death of a parent or a child. Things can’t hold together anymore. Sometimes, our lives fall to pieces. They fall apart like a misshapen clay pot on the potter’s wheel. But sometimes they have to, so God can remake us. So God can help us find our true selves we are meant to be. Sometimes, there needs to be an end, so there can be a new beginning. And Jesus disciples must accept that too. They must accept the cross. And his way of death and resurrection. Jesus invites us to follow him

and let go and be born again. To find our deeper meaning and purpose in him. To become a little foretaste of the heavenly banquet. That's my dream for this community of faith. That we will follow Jesus and say what he says and do what he does and love who he loves. That we will take up the cross and lay down our life for the life of the world. Jesus wants followers, not fans. He wants people who will dedicate their lives to his grace and mercy. Who know the cost and are ready to pay it.

"Listen," Jesus says, "this will take my life. And it will take yours. But you don't wouldn't want anything less from divine love. You wouldn't expect anything less from God."

Jesus tells the crowd, "Come and be my disciples. Come, suffer with me. Come, carry up the cross with me. Or don't. It is your choice." Just as today, it is OUR choice. We get to decide what our lives will be about. That's something the pandemic revealed to us. If we changed what we did, the world wouldn't crumble. We don't have to be swept along blindly. We can choose. Our lives are our responsibility. It was a rude awakening when I had to teach my own kids during COVID. I had gotten comfortable with someone else being responsible for that. I had

also gotten comfortable with someone else putting food in the grocery store and keeping me safe from germs in public and putting on events to entertain me. And suddenly all of that was on me. The same is happening to our faith. We have had this corporate model and our denomination is responsible for us. Or the pastor or the church camp or the Session. We leave have left discipleship to others. But things are changing. God is making a new kind of vessel.

It means all of us get to make a choice. We must decide to follow Jesus, and carry the cross ourselves. Or not. And if we do, then we must lay down everything else. Because that's all Jesus asks of us. We must laying down our own desires and our own will. We must lay down our future plans and ideas of success. We must lay down our need to please others and impress others and build up a following among others. We must lay down our own self-interest as a church and our own urge for self-preservation. We will be laying down our own way for the way of Jesus, and the Kingdom of God. We are choosing the way that allows God to break us down and remake us again and again as needed.

That is the cost of being Jesus' disciple. It is the cost of self-giving love. It is the price God will pay. Because it is what we need. It is what the world needs. And Jesus knew that. He knew that this was his mission and this is where he had been headed all along. And he didn't deny it or try to run from it. He stretched out his arms and embraced it. He took in all the broken, misshapen, wounded pieces of creation. He held it all in his hands, all of our anger and fear and loneliness and grief. He held it all and gently pressed and molded and worked and reshaped it. He worked on our stiffness and rigidity and stubbornness. He worked as he still works on us today. Working and working us like a block of river clay. Warming us, pushing us, shaping, forming, and sculpting us into something that seems good to him. Breaking us down, building us back up. Here together, Jesus is making us into something new. Teaching us to carry the cross. To know the true cost of love. We share the baptism of life and death. And the difficulties of life and the mercy of God that holds us together. At this table, we eat the bread of brokenness, and drink the cup of life, poured out. We choose to be part of the dying and rising again. Instead of avoiding it or denying it or transferring on to

others, we trust that in this way, God will transform us. After the end will come the beginning. After death, resurrection.

Jesus says, if you want to be my disciples, you must know the true cost.

If you come with me, you must carry the cross with me. You will be broken down and reshaped. You will be refashioned by divine love.

Your life will be shaped by my life and death and life again. It is your decision to choose what matters. If you are my disciples, then choose to come and follow me.