

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Feel like you all should get some kind of gold star for being here today. *[Ed. note: it was very hot.]*

In my early days as a priest and preacher, I would often read the lection text while preparing my sermon and skip the text that seemed too difficult or hard to preach on. Sometimes it was the Old Testament, but often it was one of these kind of gospel texts. I didn't feel as a new priest, quite qualified to explain what Jesus meant in what we call his hard sayings, the hard sayings of Jesus. I found it intimidating, but eventually I felt convicted by the Spirit to stop avoiding the hard sayings of Jesus.

So now it's like a policy of mine that unless I have a really, really good reason, I should just go ahead and preach on the hardest lesson of the day. I know that it's often fruitful when I do endeavor to do that. Some are more successful than others, though. This season of ordinary time in the summer, we have read many of the hard sayings of Jesus. Today is no exception, and in Luke's gospel, we read Jesus saying to the crowd, not just to his 12 disciples, but to everybody, these words, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."

What did Jesus mean, and was Jesus really preaching hatred here? Somebody asked me this week, whether the Greek word in this text is really hate the way we translate it in English, which is a great question. I definitely checked, hoping for an easy out, but no. The Greek word *miseo* is actually pretty similar to what we use in English as hate, because it literally means to detest and by extension, of course, to love less. But of, course, we do have to consider our context. Think for a moment, just what is your reaction; what do you feel; what comes up for you when you hear those words of Jesus? "Whoever does not hate their mother, father, et cetera, can't be my disciple."

If you're like me, you probably react pretty strongly to it, and you find it startling and jarring. You're supposed to be startled. It is meant to startle us. Now recall Jesus' techniques that he uses, like hyperbole,

exaggeration, to make his point. Now he really does this a lot in the gospels. Do you remember that time Jesus said to us, "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away," like that. He doesn't mean literally do that. Exaggeration and hyperbole were common in Hebrew. It's a linguistic technique that's used. Rabbi Jack Abramowitz (I read a little bit of his writings this week), he talks about the fact that all the Jewish prophets used exaggeration, hyperbole. They used figurative language. This is part of the tradition and that is what Jesus is doing in the tradition of the prophets.

Jesus like the prophets, wants to wake us up, to get our attention, to rouse us, to startle his listeners, and it works. So we have to keep that linguistic technique in mind. We also know that in the ancient times, people use words like we do today, even words like hate, to mean something a little bit different. Think about how we use that word, "Don't hate that squeaky door." Or how about, "I hate people who correct my grammar." Well, actually, on that one, that's probably realistic. But we use these words for emphasis, and Jesus is employing this kind of technique here.

The second thing is we have to let scripture interpret scripture. This is one of our cardinal rules. Jesus is frequently telling his followers that God needs to come first and that no one, no one should come before God. In fact, Jesus tells us frequently not to hate, right? I mean, what about all Jesus teachings about loving our enemies? Doing good to those who hate us, right? He's not really turning around now and preaching hate. Jesus is really up to something here. So Jesus is saying, "Not even our loved ones, our most cherished friends or family should be put before God." When we put it that way, that's a lot softer to the ear, but we should still be startled by it because this is a tall order. This is a hard thing and a hard saying.

Jesus wants us, wants his followers to be clear about, what Bonhoeffer called the cost of discipleship, the cost. To follow Jesus, we need to recognize that it can cost us everything, everything, even life itself. Following Jesus leads straight to the foot of the cross, and that is startling. Jesus first uses though, this imagery for us. He talks about counting the cost of the building project before laying the foundation to

help us understand what he's getting at here. Then he uses a military image in which he describes a king or a commander, counting the cost, considering the outcome before entering a war. That's the imagery he's using.

You might be like me, and immediately what comes to mind for me are those images we've all seen of your average every day Ukrainian taking up arms. I mean, counting the cost, knowing what it will cost. The same is true for their military, our servicemen and women, counting the cost before going into war, knowing it means you can lose everything. Jesus is telling us to be a Christian; to follow him is an invitation to be willing to give it all up, family, even life itself, for the sake of God. In the ancient Celtic Christian tradition, which I love, I think they offer us a helpful way to think about it, because in the Celtic tradition, there were three types of martyrdom. They listed them by color.

So the first type of martyrdom, how we die to ourselves for God, was called red martyrdom. That's what we think of when we think of martyrdom. It's that traditional sense of literally giving our blood, of dying a physical death for God. But they also had a second one called the white martyrdom, and this was a dying in a sense of forsaking one's home, of leaving one's homeland and all that we love, even family, because you were called to a mission to do something for God. Think of missionaries, right? But there was a third one called the green martyrdom. The green martyrdom was the forsaking of one's daily habits or possessions or whatever ordinary thing we might otherwise be attached to in our daily life, giving it up for the sake of drawing closer to God in serving others.

I think it's pretty clear that we're actually all called to some kind of martyrdom. Now, most of us will not be called to be red martyrs. Some of us might truly be called to be white martyrs. I know some of us here have engaged in that. But I dare say that every single disciple of Jesus is called to be a green martyr. We never know, though. We might be asked at any given moment to give up everything on a moment's notice when we follow Jesus. Now, I'm not saying this means you view yourself as a victim, "I'm a martyr." That isn't at all what Jesus is talking about. It is actively choosing habits and patterns of sacrifice in

our lives, that draws closer to God, that honor God, that demonstrates God is first. The amazing irony is when we do that, when we die to ourselves in that way we find... What do we find? More abundant life. Because admittedly, so much of what we do, what we own, what we are attached to, what we put our hopes in, doesn't really nourish or fulfill our spirit at all.

You just go through your typical day, you can see it. Jesus is giving us a formula to order our affections, our love with God first, and everything else second, because whenever we put something else before God, it's in that vein of idolatry, like the Deuteronomy lesson we were talking about, they can become idols in our lives. So the question for us is really, do you really want to follow Jesus? Have you counted the cost? If you're unsure, I want to offer you some encouragement, because yes, while it is not easy to be a disciple, it is costly. It is not easy to live sacrificially. It's not easy to give up attachments. I promise you will find new more abundant life. You will find the most rewarding, liberating, meaningful, fulfilling, joyful life you could ever imagine.

There is no better or higher calling, but we do have to take that step of faith and give our lives to God, to follow Jesus, give our very lives, dying to ourselves. But no, we don't do it alone. We do it with God's help, by grace, and then we are able to live by faith, with hope. We can take up our cross and die so that we can truly live. Thanks be to God.