

SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

June 28/29, 2008

“The Cost of Discipleship”

In his book, The Cost of Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that the deadliest enemy of the Christian church is something he calls “cheap grace.” He says, and I quote, “cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal contrition. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.”

One doesn't have to look too far to find evidence of this “cheap grace” these days. There are many who call themselves Christian who do not follow Jesus Christ – who may hold to the basic principles and philosophies of Christian doctrine without practicing what is preached – who conform Christ to their way of life rather than conform their way of life to Christ. They are people who are unwilling to pay the cost of discipleship.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Christ reminds his first disciples, and thereby us as well, that faith in him and discipleship, that is, following him, are inseparable like two sides of the same coin. Faith without discipleship isn't real faith and discipleship without faith is hypocrisy.

“Don't imagine that I have come to bring peace on earth! I have not come to bring peace, but a sword,” Jesus said. While faith in Christ certainly brings us peace with God it also can bring us into conflict with others. For example – Christian parents are committed to raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and yet, at times, the more they seek to do just that, the more conflict they can have with their children. And again, conflict can arise in the home where husband and wife don't share a common faith, especially where one is a Christian and the other is not.

It's at those times and in those kinds of situations that the Christian may be tempted to compromise, to pull back, to go along to get along, to say or do nothing for the sake of supposed peace and harmony. And yet we need to ask ourselves if we're going to compromise our discipleship in such matters, how can we remain faithful to Christ and our confession of faith?

Christ himself warns us that only as we love him more than anyone else; only as we take up our cross in that love and follow him; only as we lose our lives by denying our old sinful nature and the things of this world are we being what he has made us to be. You see, to value anything or anyone more highly than we value Christ is, in the end, idolatry. Christ's claim upon his followers is costly and complete.

And there's no room for cheap grace here. Just as Christ was willing to pay the price in obedience to the Father with his very life on the cross for us, so now, we who follow him are called to pay the price in obedience too – maybe not in death but certainly in life.

The picture of Jesus in our text for today and the content of his sayings about discipleship may disturb us a bit, make us uncomfortable. We tend to prefer to think of him only as a kind, gentle, loving Jesus who is not overly demanding in his expectations of us – one who says as so many do today, “Whatever.”

So how do we deal with these uncompromising demands? Is being a Christian really worth all that he calls for? Is it worth it when it means self-denial, suffering, and cross-bearing? Is it worth even losing one's life? Jesus said it was worth it. Paul knew the truth of that when he said that the sufferings of this present time are not even worth comparing to what God has in store for the faithful in the world to come. For if we remain faithful unto death, not only in word but in deed as well, we too shall receive the crown of life.

Although we may live in a different time and place than his first disciples, Christ's complete and costly claim on his followers still holds true. A readiness to sacrifice everything, even one's own life, is still what it means to be a disciple.

The promise of Christ that in losing one's life for his sake will find real life still holds true. The goal of losing one's life is not simply self-denial, rather the goal is self-giving and the means is self-denial. Such a denial certainly affects and challenges our old sin-loving nature of which St. Paul speaks in today's epistle lesson. And doesn't that old nature need to be challenged? No one can ever really find meaning and purpose in life apart from faith in Christ or without following him.

You see, in the light of Christ's claim upon us and his promise to us, everything else becomes relative compared to the absoluteness of discipleship. No longer can we feel comfortable with one foot in church and the other in the world. No longer can we half-heartedly worship or commune or read and study the Bible or give of our time and talents and treasures when we know Christ demands it all. No longer can we feel comfortable in doing that which is contrary to our relationship with Christ and in not doing what Christ has commanded us to do. No longer can we be satisfied with “cheap grace” when we know that Christ paid the ultimate price so that we can have “real grace”. No longer can we feel indifferent to Christ's claim upon our whole lives.

May God empower us to grow not only in our faith but in our discipleship this day for Jesus' sake. Amen.