

**23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 5, 2010**

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The section of today's gospel just proclaimed is sometimes called St. Luke's dissertation on the costs of discipleship. It is a harsh, blunt assertion that in real-life practical terms following Jesus cannot be indulged as an abstraction. Following Jesus will cost—and it will cost everyone who really tries to follow him.

Scripture scholar Fr. John Donahue titled a homily he wrote almost ten years ago on these readings: "I never promised you a rose garden." Now I realize this is Labor Day weekend, the traditional end—at least culturally—of summer. Few of us are in the mood to hear harshness today. But may I remind you, I didn't pick the readings; I just get to preach on them.

Whether it's the Book of Wisdom reminding us of just how many difficult decisions, how many painful choices, every life entails, or St. Paul as an old man in prison pleading from the depths of his own heart for a former slave of Philemon's, or Jesus' stark analysis of what real discipleship costs, the horizon is sobering.

It is relatively easy to follow Jesus in the abstract. One can pick and choose the lighter, more spiritually uplifting passages of scripture for edification. Graces abound in most of our lives when we stop to think about

them. But, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, some grace is cheap grace; and some grace is costly grace.

Bonhoeffer was the German, Lutheran theologian who was arrested and finally hanged just before the end of the war in Europe. He was accused of being part of a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. He realized very painfully in his own life what he had written about in 1937 in a little but very influential book called, interestingly enough, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

He writes: “Cheap grace is preaching forgiveness without repentance; it is baptism without the discipline of community; it is the Lord’s Supper without confession of sin; it is absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ.”

Costly grace realizes that Jesus, and only Jesus, is now the center of one’s life. There can be no room for competing loyalties. And following him will always be painful. Yes, Luke’s version does use the Greek word for “hate” in the context of family relationships and their priority. It is a harsh word, hate (miseí); Matthew’s version of the same injunction turns the phrase around a bit to say “Whoever loves his father, mother or family *more than me*, cannot be my disciple.” That really is probably the meaning.

Jesus is, nonetheless, reminding the people of priorities, or the need to discern carefully one's values, the real values we give high marks to in life. Is it certain people? Family, friends? Is it possessions? Wealth? Reputation? What matters most to you? Really now?

If you really want to say you follow Jesus, those priorities will have to be weighed very carefully. And that process will cost. It will cost, perhaps, dearly. And then there is—and will be—the cross. It is inevitable. It is painful—always. It is the only way to follow him. Any other path is a path viewed only through the lens of cheap grace. Costly grace always hurts. Just ask Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It is the price of true discipleship—always!

The parables Jesus uses to illustrate his point are as obvious to us today as they would have been to his contemporaries. None of us is stupid enough to start building a tower without enough materials; none of us wages war (whether literally or figuratively) without contemplating the odds. So, Jesus says: make sure you have the strength and courage to really follow him to the end. Because only there will you bathe in the light of the New Beginning: eternal Life in God's Kingdom.

I never did promise you a rose garden. Just life—and in abundance. Come follow me! Today's liturgy proclaims: The cost is worth it. But it

will cost.