THE COST AND JOY OF FOLLOWING

A Lenten Study on Discipleship

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INTRODUCTION

The six weeks leading up to Easter Sunday is the season of Lent, a time for Christians to meditate on their commitment to Jesus and resolve to be stronger and more faithful in discipleship—that is, in the practice of following Jesus and his teachings.

A disciple is a student. In ancient times, to "follow" someone was to submit to the *discipline* of that person's teaching. Thus, the men and women who followed Jesus were called his *disciples*. Disciples of Jesus today continue to study his teachings, endeavor to change their lives to follow him, and are committed to carrying out his ministry in the world. Taken seriously, this is not an easy life, but it brings immense

reward—not just in the next life but in this one as well. As revered theologian and twentieth-century martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his classic book *The Cost of Discipleship,*

> if we answer the call to discipleship, where will it lead us? What decisions and partings will it demand? . . . Only Jesus Christ, who bids us to follow him, knows the journey's end. But we do know that it will be a road of boundless mercy. Discipleship means joy.[1]

Like us, Jesus's first disciples were far from perfect. The Gospels often portray the disciples as bumbling, afraid, thickheaded, and weak in faith. Jesus frequently had to correct their expectations of him and of what discipleship means. They pledged their loyalty and then abandoned Jesus in the time of his greatest need. But these disciples eventually drew so much courage and conviction from Jesus's example of self-emptying love that they left behind the lives they had known and dedicated their lives to serving him, even at the risk of their own lives. As members of the body of Christ today, we can learn from what Jesus taught the first disciples and apply that "discipline" to our own lives.

Over the next six weeks, we will ponder how Jesus:

- gave the disciples the **faith to take risks** as they left everything to follow him;
- gave the disciples **courage** through God's calming presence;
- taught that **learning and devotion** are requirements of discipleship;
- corrected their aspirations to greatness and taught them **humility**;
- sent the disciples out in twos to **work together in community**; and
- demonstrated **perseverance** in the darkest hours.

Whether you are reading this study with a group that gathers weekly to share and discuss or on your own as a personal discipline for Lent, take time to read some of the referenced Scripture passages in your own Bible and reflect on the costs and joys revealed in the disciples' experience with Jesus. Questions for personal reflection or group discussion, as well as a brief prayer, are included at the end of each chapter

to enhance your spiritual practice throughout the season of Lent.

NOTE

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (SCM, 2015), xxxiv.

Week 1

DISCIPLES TAKE RISKS

The first risk that Jesus's disciples took was making the choice to follow him. Later, as apostles, they would take many more risks in spreading the gospel, and some of them forfeited their lives. But the initial decision to follow Jesus was the first risk that each one took. And this is the same risk we take today. We cannot know exactly what is in store for us, but we commit to the discipline of being Jesus's followers.

Jesus called a lot of people who ended up not becoming his disciples. Some were discouraged by the itinerant lifestyle and the requirement that they leave their homes (Luke 9:57–62). Some were unable to give up their possessions (Matt. 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). Some simply

might have found his teachings too difficult. Jesus did not condemn these people who could not say yes. In fact, it seems that Jesus understood. He told would-be disciples that they were wise to count the cost, and he felt love for a rich young ruler who turned away saddened because he could not give up all he had to follow Jesus (Matt. 19:16–30).

In the United States today, Christians do not face the same risks that the first disciples did. It is relatively easy to become a follower of Jesus, even if we disagree quite a bit on what being a Christian entails. Our culture has become Christo-normative. Given the political rhetoric, sometimes it seems as if it is riskier *not* to be a Christian. Have we lost sight of what risk-taking discipleship looks like? Have we become comfortable, no longer feeling challenged by Jesus's call to a radically changed lifestyle?

This session examines portrayals of people who decided to risk following Jesus and explores what this risk entailed. Some took the plunge without question, while others came to a more gradual decision. No matter the nature of their initial response, they all made a life-changing

commitment that radically changed their lives. As we study, we might keep in mind what made us decide to follow Jesus and the ways we are still committed to that decision.

THE INSTANT RISK-TAKERS

Galilean fishermen named Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John immediately left their boats to follow him when Jesus said, "Follow me" (Matt 4:18–22; Mark 1:16–20). The parallel story in Luke 5:1–11 recounts how the fishermen were convinced to follow Jesus after he demonstrated the abundance of God's love in the miraculous catch of fish. Saul of Tarsus also followed Christ after seeing a vision of the risen Lord (Acts 9:3–6; 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16).

In Matthew and Mark, the stories of Jesus calling the first disciples are stunning in their directness and simplicity. Jesus called, and the fishermen dropped everything and followed him. They left behind their livelihoods and family—the image of the father left sitting in the boat is striking. One might deem the fishermen's behavior delusional. If one of our friends

or family members simply got up and walked away to follow a charismatic person who beckoned to them, we would suspect illness or brainwashing. No doubt we would try to talk sense into them or rescue them. In fact, this is what Jesus's own family attempted to do when they heard about the crowds following Jesus. "They went out to restrain him, for people were saying 'He has gone out of his mind'" (Mark 3:21). The Gospels do not tell us how the disciples' families reacted to their risk-taking behavior, but we can conjecture from the example of Jesus's family that there must have been some concern, if not out-and-out attempts to stop them. We might ponder what it was they saw in Jesus that caused their radical decision to follow him.

Something about Jesus made these fishermen take what must have seemed like a foolhardy risk. The kingdom of God overpowers some people that way. Jesus told parables about going all in when one finds the kingdom. In the parable of the pearl, for example, he says that the kingdom of God is like a pearl so fine that one would immediately sell everything to buy it (Matt. 13:45–46), and Jesus also said that a follower of his cannot look

back (Luke 9:62). Evidently, Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John saw the kingdom of God in Jesus, and they left everything to have this valuable pearl.

Leaving Everything

The disciples left their homes, families, and livelihoods. In the Gospel of Mark, Peter says to Jesus, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus assures Peter that he will receive one hundredfold what he has given up and eternal life (Mark 10:28–30). Jesus tells a rich young man to sell all he has, give to the poor, and follow him, and then he will have treasure in heaven (Matt. 19:21). Even with the promise of treasure in heaven, few Christians today choose to follow this lifestyle. Admittedly, Jesus's time was an era of "apocalyptic expectation," when many people, like the apostle Paul, expected that the world as they knew it would end very soon. They were prepared and willing to leave everything to follow the Messiah. What are we willing to leave behind to follow Jesus?

With the exception of Christians who join a religious community that takes care of their basic needs, most Christians today rely on the stability of work, home, and established communities. In

fact, the church supports these values. Though Jesus said not to worry about food and clothing and other necessities (Matt. 6:24–34), it seems foolhardy to add to the ranks of people experiencing homelessness in the world. Moreover, most of us would consider it irresponsible, even criminal, to abandon our families. How do you think the disciples' risk-taking decision could be applied to discipleship today?

Some Christians today follow Jesus by supporting those in need with the bulk of their wealth while they themselves live on subsistence wages. They risk their own future well-being and community status to help others. Some Christians spend a great deal of their time doing ministry in their communities as volunteers. Some devote themselves in all aspects of their lives to promoting justice for those who have no voice.

MESSIANIC HOPES FOR A WARRIOR KING

Without attempting to undermine the profound effect Jesus had on these risk-taking disciples, we can consider how the historical and cultural

context in which they lived played a part in their immediate response to Jesus. One of the most powerful expressions of Jewish hope for freedom was the expectation of a messiah in the line of David who would restore Israel to political autonomy and holiness under God. For many Jews, the "kingdom of God" would be an actual earthly kingdom that God's messiah would establish after overthrowing the Romans. Therefore, many Jews in Galilee were continually on the lookout for a messianic leader as a successor to King David and were ready, at a moment's notice, to follow this messiah.

Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, where the rhetoric of revolt was especially prevalent and where would-be messiahs rose up to lead fellow Jews into guerilla warfare against Roman occupation, only to be squashed by the Roman army. Josephus, a Jewish historian of that time, said that almost all the armed revolts and guerilla warfare against Rome began in the region of Galilee.

In the midst of these frustrated expectations, Jesus appeared on the Galilean lakeshore, preaching the kingdom of God (4:13–17), and

Messianic Expectation Today

In the United States, we live in a stable society with no occupying forces. We are not looking for an end to foreign occupation of our land. And yet the world and our nation are far from perfect. Among many Christians there is hope for Christ's return as a warrior messiah who will conquer evil in the world and usher in a new age. We see this imagery especially in Revelation 19:11–21 and 21:1–8, where Christ comes in triumph riding a white horse to defeat his enemies with the sword and to usher in a new heaven and new earth.

he called out to four fishermen (vv. 18–22). Given the radical nature of Galilean messianic hope, perhaps these fishermen's response was not merely an instantaneous decision but the realization of a lifelong hope. We simply do not know how much they might have heard about Jesus before he called them, or if they knew anything at all, but they must have recognized him as the hoped-for messiah.

Revolutionary hopes were not the whole story for everyone who followed Jesus. At least one of the people Jesus called to discipleship was not a Galilean radical and did not support overthrowing

the Roman Empire's control. Levi, also known as Matthew (9:9), was a Jewish tax collector who was in cahoots with Rome. He benefited financially by being employed by the Roman imperial system. Tax collectors were hated by their fellow Jews because they colluded with the Roman oppression through extortion of money. But when Jesus said to Levi, "Follow me," Levi got up, left everything, and followed him (Luke 5:27). The story does not tell us Levi's reasons, but apparently, he found hope and an opportunity to turn his life around by following Jesus's call. Jesus affects some people like that. Levi left behind his wealth and a stable government position to follow Jesus and never looked back. The Gospel of Matthew is attributed to this eyewitness.

SEEING IS BELIEVING: CONVINCED TO TAKE THE RISK

In Luke's version of the story of Jesus's calling the four fishermen, Jesus appears on the lakeshore. Simon (called Peter) saw something compelling in Jesus, because he agreed to take him

in his boat out from shore so that Jesus could teach the crowds from a vantage that was like being on a stage, where he could be seen and heard. Peter further humored Jesus by letting down the nets—again—after a fruitless night of fishing, at Jesus's bidding (Luke 5:1–5).

The next thing Simon Peter knew was that the nets were filled with so many fish that another boat had to come help pull them in, and the boats were so full that they began to sink (vv. 6–7). Simon Peter witnessed a miracle of God's overwhelming abundance, and he was so startled that he fell to his knees and confessed himself to be a sinner unworthy to be in Jesus's presence (v. 8). Luke's version shows Peter's fearful repentance rather than zealous abandon. "Do not be afraid," Jesus tells Simon. "From now on you will be catching people" (v. 10).

Simon's brother and some of Simon's fishing partners who had helped pull in the miraculous catch of fish (including James and John) also left their boats and nets to follow Jesus (v. 11). They took the risk of being Jesus's disciples because they had witnessed something they wanted to be part of, even if they didn't fully understand it.

The story of Saul of Tarsus, who became the apostle Paul, is a dramatic example of risk-taking discipleship. Saul began as an ardent opponent of the church (Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13) until he saw a vision of the risen Christ (Acts 9:3–6; cf. 1 Cor. 15:8; Gal. 1:16). Before this experience of Jesus, Saul was dragging followers of Jesus off to prison (Acts 8:3) and "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord" (9:1). Afterward, he devoted his life to proclaiming the gospel, establishing churches, and becoming an outspoken defender of the mission to the Gentiles.

MESSIANIC HOPES FOR A RIGHTEOUS HOLY ONE

A warrior king was not the only type of messiah for whom Jews of Jesus's time hoped. The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the 1940s in the Judean desert, date back to Jesus's time. The scrolls reveal that some Jews expected *two* messiahs: one a king like David to subdue the Romans and one a high priest who would restore right worship and devotion to God in the Jerusalem temple. Even though Jesus's disciples

were from Galilee and immersed in anti-Roman rhetoric, they also had a spiritual hunger and may have recognized Jesus as God's Holy One.

Many Jews believed that the people in charge of temple worship were not legitimate because they were not descendants of the tribe of Levi, the first high priest. But by the time the Gospels were written, the Jerusalem temple was no more. The Roman army quelled a four-year-long rebellion that ended with the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning and looting of the temple in 70 CE. Thus, the messianic hopes for a righteous Holy One in the vein of true priesthood were not to be fulfilled. Jesus would not have met this expectation, in any case, because he was not a Levite.

Jesus was not calling the disciples to fight against an earthly kingdom or restore right worship to the temple but to something much greater: to become part of the heavenly kingdom, God's ideal world. The disciples needed to see Jesus as a king greater than the emperor and a kingdom greater than Rome. They had to understand that Jesus was not at all what they expected him to be but something much more profound.

At that time, given their expectations, it would have been difficult for the disciples to imagine what sort of kingdom Jesus had in mind. We can also better understand why many of Jesus's Jewish contemporaries did not recognize him as the Messiah. He simply did not fulfill expectations. Christians today can ponder how Jesus's heavenly kingdom differs from our worldly expectations and the risks involved in following that vision.