

A DEMANDING WAY OF LIFE

In her novel, *Saint Maybe*, Anne Tyler tells the story of a nineteen-year-old man named Ian. Ian feels guilty about his brother's death and he feels some responsibility to help raise his brother's children. At Christmas break, Ian sees how taking care of his brother's three children is wearing his mother down. So, Ian contemplates leaving college to help. One January evening, a few days before he is to return to college for the spring semester, he notices a yellow glow through a window. He creeps closer to read on a sign, "Church of the Second Chance." He hears the congregation singing; he misses most of the words, but the voices are strong and joyful, so he goes in. They sing some more hymns. Reverend Emmett prays. There is something about the prayer that catches Ian's attention. After the service Ian talks with Rev. Emmett and then heads home.

Ian tells his parents about his decision to take some time off from college to help with the family. "I don't understand," his mother says. "No one in his right mind would approve," his father tells him. "What in the name of God...?" his mother exclaims. "Well, that's just it," Ian says, "I mean, I don't want to sound corny but it is in the name of God." "Ian, have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" his father asks. "Of course, we have nothing against religion," his mother tells him, "we raised all of you children to be Christians. But our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life." "Well, maybe it should have," Ian says. His parents just look at each other. (pp. 115-129)

"Our church never asked us to abandon our entire way of life," and yet, as Ian pointed out, maybe it should have. After all, the church is founded on the chief cornerstone, Jesus Christ, who never once minced words about the demands and the costs of being one of his disciples. Jesus made it abundantly clear that, if we were going to follow him, it would not be easy. The way of discipleship is a 24/7 strenuous task. Christ demands our very best in everything we do, all of the time. There is no let-up. There is no such thing as a part-time Christian.

Being a Christian is a demanding way of life! It is assumed that being a disciple of Jesus means that we believe in him or we believe certain things about him (such as, he is the Son of God, fully human yet fully divine, that he was sinless, died on the cross for our sins, rose again from the dead, and so on). While belief is important, our belief in Jesus is not an end in itself. After all, in the gospels, we seldom hear Jesus say, "Believe in me." Instead, time and time again, we hear Jesus say, "Follow me."

In the lesson for today, we learn that large crowds were traveling with Jesus. By this time in Luke's gospel, Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem, and he fully realized that suffering, abandonment, and death awaited him there. Along the way Jesus had set aside ultimate loyalty to family and friends, to security and possessions, because his priority and focus was to follow God's will and fulfill God's purpose.

Thus, Jesus demanded the very same commitment from his disciples. He turned to the crowds and, three times, he instructed them that they could not be his disciples if they were unwilling to count the cost and pay the price of following him. While some yearned to taste the bread of life and drink from the cup of salvation surely most were there out of curiosity. They had heard Jesus teach, and they wanted to hear more. Some wanted more miracles of healing and feeding the multitudes. Some joined with Jesus in the hope that their dreams of

a military leader, who would conquer the Romans, would be realized in him. Some came for the rush of the sheer excitement of it all.

Jesus didn't want curiosity; he wanted commitment on their part. He wasn't interested in building crowds; rather, his focus was on developing disciples. Thus, Jesus told the large crowds to "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even life itself." The Semitic verb to hate actually means to turn away from or to detach oneself from. Thus, Jesus isn't counseling us to hate in the same way that we understand and use the word today but to love others and our own life less than we love the Lord. Jesus' mandate about bearing one's own cross and following him was fully realized by those earliest disciples, who constantly risked persecution, suffering and perhaps death. At the very least, Jesus was calling them (and us!) to a life of self-giving and personal sacrifice. We are called to pick up the daily problems, burdens, and responsibilities of ethical living. Finally, Jesus told the crowds to give up all your possessions. Jesus knew only too well how our possessions have a way of possessing us; they can all too easily become our idols. Jesus wants our full allegiance and so he demands that we let go of the things that get in the way of our relationship with him.

The two brief stories about a builder, who didn't take the time to estimate the cost of a given project, or a king, who didn't do his homework before waging war with an army twice as big, reiterate the need to count the cost of being one of Jesus' disciples before jumping in with zeal but failing to follow through on commitment.

Once again, Jesus' words are hard for us to hear and even more difficult for us to live by. Discipleship, by Jesus' definition, is not comfortable; rather, it is a very demanding way of life. That being the case, we confess that, more often than not, our attempts at discipleship are half-hearted. We do not count the cost and we lack perseverance. Sometimes, our priorities become jumbled, all mixed up, and we lose sight of our singular focus on loving and serving God above all else. What then?

The good news is that God never loses sight of us. Jesus continues to call us and invite us to his table. The word sacrament, in the Latin, means an oath of allegiance. Our Lord instituted this sacrament of the Lord's Supper as a way for us to renew our obedience to him. But, I've also come to understand that, here in this sacrament, Jesus reemphasizes his love and commitment to us, to never leave or forsake us - no matter how much we fail him!

God's grace is free but there is a cost to discipleship. A minister visited a church where the pastor proudly showed off the brand new sanctuary. The pastor pointed to the elegant cross suspended over the altar, and noting that it was large and made in Europe, he bragged, "That cross cost us \$5,000.00. The visitor replied, "My goodness, there was a time when you could get one of those for free, just for the asking."

As we receive God's free gift of grace and are empowered by the Holy Spirit, we seek to become disciples, who willingly accept the demands and strive to live in obedience to the gospel. We are able to respond to that demanding way of life because Christ Jesus suffered on the cross and died for us. We are resurrected with Christ for a new life. We are given a second chance (and more!) at loving God and following Christ.

If we endeavor to live as Christian disciples, then we will discover that - when we live utterly dependent on God, when we live in partnership with Christ, when we are accountable to the promptings of the Holy Spirit - it is then that everything gets better. The cost of discipleship leads us to an even greater

reward. Although Christ's way is demanding, at the same time, it is the best way that leads to fulfillment, joy, peace, and eternal life. That's a pretty good return on our investment, wouldn't you say? What we give in service to Christ pales in comparison to what we gain from him. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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