

fight or seeks peace instead. Christianity is not always easy. The cost can be other people's perception that you live in a different world. But, actually, that's not far from the truth!

Will Willimon, one of the premier preachers of our age, was once quoted in an interview saying, "The Gospel is weird and, if you believe the Gospel, then you will be weird. If you believe the Gospel, you will feel yourself in collision with the most widely held and deeply affirmed values of this society. As a chaplain at Duke University, I am continually amazed at how the simplest little everyday Christian stuff is considered to be so radical". Think of those simple statements of faith that we all heard and learned in Sunday School. To live out any of these well-loved teachings can cost us—cost us of our time, our effort, our money, our reputation: love your enemies, be a Good Samaritan, make allegiance to God more important than being Canadian, when people demand you do this much offer to that much more, forgive those who hurt you, be more concerned about God than income. Those simple things of Christian faith that, when lived, requires something of you.

Now if this was all Jesus ever said on discipleship, then I think we'd all quit right now. It can seem not that appealing. It even sounds tough. But Jesus also said things like, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light" (Matt. 11:29-30). This is what makes cross bearing a hopeful way... a way that's possible. The pathway to God is now clear. The work of the cross makes discipleship achievable. Christ walking with us in discipleship makes the way manageable. Being a Christian in a crowd may make you stand out. But Jesus promised that if you do, you don't stand alone.

For centuries our partner in making disciples of Jesus has been our society. Society is no longer our partner, and so the church has to learn how to make disciples on its own...disciples who will live in a society that is, at best, ambivalent about Christianity. So this passage forces on us the question, "How does being a Christian make me different from those around me who aren't? How is that difference—in the life I live—seen by others? Do they see Christ lived out in me?" We need to think about this question as a congregation that is thinking about its future. How do we help our congregants willingly accept the path of discipleship knowing that growing in their Christian faith will make demands on their lives? How do we create a faith nurture track that helps people follow Jesus ever more closely?

"Saving Your Life By Losing It"

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Text: Luke 14:25-35

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Have you heard of Arthur Blessitt? He is a Christian who spent most of 29 years hauling a 12-foot tall wooden cross around the world. A journey that started on Christmas Day 1969 finished in 1998. According to the Guinness Book of Records, Blessitt has walked further than any other human being: over 52,000 kilometers through 277 nations and territories. He went to Antarctica and Zimbabwe. He's survived a firing squad in Nicaragua, a stoning in Morocco and an arrest by the Los Angeles Police Department. He's had audiences with people as varied as Yasir Arafat and Pope John Paul II. Every night he sought out a safe place to store his cross while he slept. He was never turned down by a bar or a nightclub, but half the churches he approached flatly refused to help. Interesting. What was his goal? To carry his cross through every country in the world by the year 2000. And he made it. "What a weird thing to commit 29 years of your life". You may wonder if this is the kind of witness our faith really needs... some bizarre Forrest Gump of a Christian just walking the landscape dragging a cross. Sure, Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple", but he hardly meant that literally.... didn't he?

Cross-bearing. When we hear that phrase, what does it mean to us, typically? Frequently it's that sense of a burden people might carry: that they are blind, or they are raising a child with a severe medical condition, or a person who bears the responsibility for making a difficult decision that will have a big negative impact on many people. "That's the cross they bear", we hear said. The sense is, in this common understanding, that the burden of these crosses are imposed on us, whether we like it or not, and that people have to endure them.

But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. Bearing the cross is a choice. It's not a burden which is imposed, rather it's a way of life which is assumed and taken on. It's a way of life Jesus called discipleship. Many were following Jesus enthusiastically, caught up in Jesus' teachings, impressed by His powers, excited to tail after him. It was like a parade. And Jesus turned to them, these followers, to tell them that following him was a lot more serious than just tagging along. It's not easy. In his teachings he gave a litany of some of the changes it required, all framed in the same way. If you come after me but do not hate your own family, you cannot be my disciple. If you come after me but do not give up all

your possessions, you cannot be my disciple. If you come after me but do not hate your own life, you cannot be my disciple. If you come after me but do not take up your own cross, you cannot be my disciple. The word “hate” here is pretty unsettling – it seems so out of place. We know instinctively that it can’t mean “hate” the way we think of it today. Jesus, after all, was all about “love”. The Jewish understanding of “hate” here is “to be detached from”. And when you think of “hate” this way, all of a sudden this passage makes sense. What Jesus is asking us in taking up our cross to follow him is to redefine our relationships, our loyalties, our priorities, to redefine all we value in terms of Him. He’s talking about the things we put our primary security in: family, possessions, wealth, our own life and abilities. Being a disciple here means putting that security in Jesus, assuming the attitudes and lifestyle of Jesus. It means recognizing that the world may consider you odd, because the life of Christ becomes for you the perspective for understanding family, possessions, your money and your own individual life.

“To be a disciple” Jesus said, “take up your own cross”. The Christian faith is to make a difference in our lives. When it does we will be seen as “different” by the people around us in life. That may not be comfortable, but it’s that discomfort, the feeling that we’re out of step with society, the potential experience of being denigrated by others for what we believe and do, that is cross bearing. In thinking about cross-bearing today, this passage forces on us the question, “How does being a Christian make me different from those around me who aren’t?” If Christians in Canada don’t look different somehow from secular folk, then those who aren’t Christian have every right to dismiss us and the one we claim to follow in living our lives.

I recently read a book by theologian Miroslav Volf, a book he dedicated to his parents. He grew up in a little town called Novi Sad in Yugoslavia in the times when Marshall Tito and the communists held undisputed power. His father was a protestant pastor serving in a congregation – something frowned on greatly by the state. Young Miroslav was chastised and bullied at school by his classmates because his father was “an enemy of the state”. Government informers, not inconspicuously, would sit in the pews on Sunday, listening to the sermon, and then frequently drop in on the Volf’s in the middle of the night to re-enforce the message that “you are walking right on the edge”. Miroslav’s anxiety and resentment over how he and his family were treated pushed him at one point as a youth to think about giving up his faith. He didn’t want to be different anymore. But, in the end, the witness of his parents had a profound effect on him. He wrote, “their commitments mirrored the commitment of Christ who “loved the church and gave himself up for her”

(Eph. 5.25). “Without that love – a love which was both Christ’s and theirs – I would never have become a Christian and never gone to be a student of theology”. He is now a Professor of Theology at Yale University.

“Bearing your own cross” is about taking the risk of making Christ so central, making His ways your ways, to risk getting out of step with those around you. So out of step, Jesus suggests, that it could even lead to suffering for His sake. But we run the risk, because as we live the life of Jesus, we give honour to God, we fulfill Jesus call to discipleship, we provide a witness to Christ. It may not be as dramatic as getting nailed to a cross like Jesus, or leaned on by the government like the Volf family. But it can still be there.

When I was in high school we had an Inter School Christian Fellowship group. There was about a dozen teens who met each week for Bible study and fun. They were great, all round kids. They believed what I believed. It was the kind of group I would have liked to join. But they were known by the other students as “*those Christians*”. They were called “the God Squad”. At the age of 15 there was no way I was joining a group that would mean people would laugh at me. In High School there is no greater social trauma than being alienated. The fear of that kept me from joining a group that I really would have enjoyed otherwise. I chose conformity. I chose not standing up for what I believed. I was not willing to be seen as different.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who experienced the pressures toward conformity in Hitler’s Germany, wrote this of cross bearing. “To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity.” Cross bearing for Bonhoeffer meant publicly challenging his denomination that had conformed to Nazi thinking. It meant joining the German underground, to work subversively against the Nazi government. It meant smuggling a Jewish family out of the country at personal risk. Acting on what he saw as the necessities of his faith ultimately resulted in Bonhoeffer’s internment in a concentration camp and his execution there. Christianity – being a follower of Jesus – is not being part of a parade. Jesus knew that following Him would set people apart as different from those around them. He knew it because it happened to Him. So he said to these followers: this is the cost of truly being a disciple of mine. And He cautioned the followers, count the cost. He said, The farmer who builds a tower to watch out for thieves stealing into the vineyard first ensures he has all the money to pay for the construction before he even begins to build. The king, before going into battle, weighs the possibility of success, to decide whether he risks the