

The High Cost of Following Jesus
 Luke 14:25–35
 September 8, 2019

When our oldest child was born, fathers generally drove their wives to the hospital and were then politely shown to the waiting room while their wives were in labor. That's what happened to me at the birth of our first child. That policy had changed by the time Nancy gave birth to Erin, our second child. Thanks to that change in policy, I was blessed to be present at the birth of three of our children. It is fairly common for fathers to witness the birth of their children today, but it was a new idea back then.

If anyone does not already have a great deal of respect for mothers, that experience of being present at the birth of your child will change you. When you personally witness the endurance needed to bring a child into the world, the phrase, "A mother's love," takes on a whole new meaning.

Of course, pregnancy and birth are only the beginning of the process. Even when our children grew up and married, we realized that you never stop being a parent. Your love for your children lasts a lifetime.

That is why our Lord's words in today's reading from Luke are so striking. *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."* This is shocking language from the one who also told us, [Exodus 20:12] *"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."* How can we reconcile these two passages of the Bible? The following story that was once told on the Lutheran Hour might help you understand:

During the Korean War, Christian preachers were singled out by the Communists. One day a group of 40 Communists kidnapped a pastor, his wife, and their two children. Outside the village they tried to force the minister to deny Jesus. He refused. They threatened to bury him, his wife, and children alive. The preacher refused. The family's captors, wishing to show they were serious, dug a hole in front of them. He refused. They put his family in the hole and said, "Because of your stubbornness your innocent children are going to die in right in front of your own eyes. Deny Christ and we shall leave you." The pastor refused. They started to fill the hole. The children were about to be covered. The preacher began to shake. The cries of his children tore at his heart.

What would you have done? A few words – that's all it would take, and everyone would be free. The answer came from the hole, from the pastor's wife. Seeing his pain she called out, "In a little while we shall all be with our Lord forever. Be bold and do not give up." Eventually, all of them were buried alive, including the preacher.

This preacher obviously loved his family, but he loved God even more. So did his wife. That is what Jesus is talking about in today's reading. Our love for God is to be so great, that our love for anyone or anything else looks like hatred in comparison.

This goes straight to the First Commandment: *You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? Answer: We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things.* Anyone or anything that we love

more than we love God is an idol. That includes our *father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even our own life.*

As I read today's Gospel, I can't help but feel guilty. Would I really be ready to let someone bury my family rather than deny my Lord? When we look at the history of the Holy Christian Church, we see the blood of the martyrs spilled on almost every page. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of Hebrews to describe the martyrs with these words:

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated ... wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

[Hebrews 11:35-38]

I must admit that the martyrs of the faith put me to shame.

Jesus also said, *"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."* Our cross is the hardship we endure simply because we are faithful to God's Word. It is the attack that the world mounts against us simply because we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

The world hates the Children of God and will use all its resources against us. Sometimes our own family will turn against us. We must be ready to cut off ties to father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, rather than be unfaithful to Jesus. We must be ready to lose our lives rather than be unfaithful to Him.

Can you do that? Neither can I ... I simply don't have the resources to conform to Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel. In fact, the parables that Jesus tells after these statements tell us that we don't have the resources to carry them out. Our attempt to surrender all in order to be faithful is like a man who starts a tower he can't finish or like a king with ten thousand men who is facing a king with twenty thousand. The world will overwhelm us if we try to carry our cross in our own power. We do not have the power in ourselves to deny our family and follow Christ. We can't do it alone.

Fortunately, we are not alone. The Holy Spirit inspired the writer of the book of Hebrews to say:

"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." [Hebrews 4:15]

Jesus is our high priest who experienced the same attacks that we do and triumphed over them.

Did the world use Jesus' family to attack Him? Listen to the words that the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to write: [Mark 3:20-21] *Then [Jesus] went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."* Later on Jesus said, [Mark 3:34-35] *"Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."* Jesus Himself had to deny His own family in order to remain faithful.

Jesus Christ was also faithful to His cross. His cross was not just a metaphor, but the real thing. His death was not just persecution for being faithful. His death was the sacrifice that made us members of God's family. You see, when Jesus endured His cross, He was making sure that there was one cross we would never have to endure – the cross we earned with our own sin. Jesus Christ endured the cross of our sin so that we don't have to. He took all our sins onto Himself and paid the debt for those sins. By His faithful suffering and death on the cross, He triumphed over sin, death, and the power of the devil. In His triumph, He rose from the dead and ascended to heaven.

Jesus offers His triumph to all people through the Holy Spirit's gift of faith. By faith, we receive adoption into God's family. He promises us that we shall always be together. Before Jesus ascended to heaven He said, ^[Matthew 28:20] *"Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."* He also said, ^[Hebrews 13:5] *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."* His triumph means that He is always by our side. He will be always be with us while we live here on this earth, and, when our time here is over, we shall live in heaven with Him forever.

Evil has no conscience. It will attack us with all its resources. It will attack us through family and friends – even through our own body. In spite of this, we need not fear, for the Holy Spirit works and sustains faith in us and works through us to give us the strength to remain faithful in spite of the world's persecution – even if it means we lose family and friends – even if it means death because of our faith.

In the rite of confirmation, we hear these questions: Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord's Supper faithfully? Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death? Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it? We never answer these questions with a simple, "I do," because we can't. Instead we answer, "I do, **by the grace of God.**" For it is only by the grace of God that we can be faithful to God even if the world threatens death or our family and friends ridicule us. By the grace of God, the Holy Spirit will keep our faith strong. God will be with us here in time and we will be with Him forever in eternity. Amen.