“The Cost of Christianity”

OT7C-22

Luke 6: 27-38

2/20/22

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Luke 6: 27-38**

“But I say to you that listen,

Love your enemies,

do good to those who hate you,

bless those who curse you,

pray for those who abuse you.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also;

and from anyone who takes away your coat

do not withhold even your shirt.

Give to everyone who begs from you;

and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

“If you love those who love you,

what credit is that to you?

For even sinners love those who love them.

If you do good to those who do good to you,

what credit is that to you?

For even sinners do the same.

If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive,

what credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Your reward will be great,

and you will be children of the Most High;

for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged;

do not condemn, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven;

give, and it will be given to you.

A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over,

will be put into your lap;

for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

“The Cost of Christianity”

Jesus never said it. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John… none of them even mentioned it.

So you won’t find the name of our faith in any of the gospels.

In fact, the term “Christian” wasn’t even used by the earliest disciples when they set out to carry on his mission once he ascended to heaven. No. Those first followers called themselves something like, “People of the Way” as they sought to live “The Way” of truth and grace Jesus had revealed.

It wasn’t until later, in a place called Antioch, that Scripture records the first use of the word “Christian.”

But even that didn’t signify the start of the religion we call Christianity.

No. For that, scholars point to the year 325… and a place called Nicaea where early church leaders gathered to settle growing theological disputes between them. And there… at that council… they decided, once and for all, that this faith tradition of ours would proclaim a Triune God… one God who always was triune, or three in one.

Of course, a lot more went into it than that. The Council of Nicaea was hugely consequential. But today, we’re not exploring the doctrines the council created or the disputes it sought to settle.

I share this because I think it’s incredible that scholars suggest the religion of Christianity didn’t begin when Jesus walked the earth… or when his first followers started creating house churches and spreading the message of God’s love in Jesus Christ… but at a theological council in the year 325. Because that, of all things, was the first time church leaders gathered to debate and settle doctrine. That was the first time leaders sought to create an organized system of beliefs they could authoritatively tell followers of Jesus Christ to believe… or mentally accept as true.

Which means, friends, that Christianity and discipleship are not the same. There were disciples, followers of Christ, *long* before there was an organized religion called Christianity. So while the terms are intimately related… and disciples are Christian and Christians are often disciples… there’s a difference.

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And the Christian Church has everything to do with this differentiation.

Across its entire existence, the Church has been rightly critiqued for often caring more about what Christians think than what Christians do.

Granted… it’s not a universal rule. But it’s not hard to look back throughout history, particularly the last 100 years, and see all the energy and time and even blood and tears that have been poured into debates over theology and doctrine. As if God cares more about what the Church teaches than what the Church actually does. As if God cares more about what disciples believe than how disciples treat those around them.

And here, I want to be clear. I do believe it’s good to explore what you believe. In fact, I think it’s important to understand what you believe and why you believe it.

But as important as that is, it’s more important to be sure your beliefs impact your behaviors.

It’s more important to be sure you let your beliefs shape the way you see this world… and how you live in it.

Because if you don’t… if you don’t let your beliefs shape you… and mold you… then your beliefs are really nothing more than thoughts.

And let’s be honest… in and of themselves, thoughts hold little value. Thoughts cost us nothing. We have thousands of them every day. And most of our thoughts don’t accomplish much at all because they remain… well… thoughts.

It’s the thoughts we act upon that become consequential.

It’s the thoughts that shape both our perspective and our actions that make a difference… both in our lives… and the lives of others.

All of which reveals the impoverished limits of a faith that begins and ends with beliefs that aren’t practiced. As if Christianity is really about thinking the right things… Agreeing with the right concepts.

For many… including myself at various points in my journey… it’s gone something like this. (BIBLE)

* What do I believe?
* Well… starting at the beginning… it seems that Scripture says God created the creation in six days. Okay. Sounds a bit unlikely considering everything we know about evolution, but sure… I’ll say I agree with that.
* Scripture seems to suggest marriage is between a man and woman.
  + But parts also seem to condone polygamy. While other parts clearly subjugate the role of women.
  + Ah well… I’m a straight, cisgendered male. No problem. I can agree with this.
* Hmmm. Here it says Scripture says we shouldn’t eat pork. And we can’t mix fabrics?
  + Now… I like me some bacon; not sure I’m ready to give that up. And I love my polyester blends. Let’s put an asterisk by that one. See if I can find something else on the topic.
  + Oh… look… God tells Peter nothing God made should be called unclean ever again. So we can eat pork… phew.
* Scripture says Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Yes. I can agree to that.
* Scripture says Jesus was born a virgin. Gotta admit… this one’s weird! Not sure I believe it… but I’ll say I will if it means I get to go to heaven when I die. Sure. Mary was a virgin.
* Digging a bit further… and it seems Scripture says Jesus died to redeem the world. Great. Thank God for that.

But then… then we get to passages like we just read.

* Scripture says to love your enemies… do good to those who hate you… bless those who curse you… pray for those who hurt you.
* Scripture says if anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and to give your goods away to anyone who asks for them.
* Scripture says not to treat others as they’ve treated you… but to always treat others with love and with grace.

So here… we have a problem. If Christianity is merely about believing the right things… thinking the right thoughts… If Christianity costs us nothing and gives us everything… then what in the world do we do with this?

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Frankly, it’s why our passage today is rarely preached upon.

It’s uncomfortable and challenging in two profound ways.

The first way is obvious:

Who here *wants* to love your enemy? Anybody? Hands? Comments in the virtual stream? Who here finds it easy to go and bless the one who’s cursed you? Who here is eager give away whatever anyone asks of you?

Seriously… if you want to, more power to you. This is challenging stuff in obvious ways!

But it’s challenging in another way, much more subtle way, as well.

Because here, as Jesus speaks to both his closest followers and a tremendous crowd that had gathered around him, **he obliterates the notion that faith has no cost. That faith doesn’t require anything of the believer. Just as he dissolves the illusion that we will ever uncover the kingdom of God by making sure our theology is just right,** **as if we can find the kingdom of God by thinking the right thoughts.**

For here… at the onset of his ministry, Jesus is making clear… he didn’t come to establish a new religion or to create new doctrines. ***Jesus came to call disciples to a new way of life*.** **A *transformational* way that finds fullness in the love and grace of God.**

In the verses preceding our lesson this morning, which Joel explored last week, Jesus shared how God blesses humanity with grace. Even when we don’t think we’re blessed, Jesus made clear, grace is ours. Even amid tears and grief… even amid wounds we don’t think anyone notices… even when our very foundation is cracking wide open, Jesus says we can trust in God’s grace to shine through the cracks.

We don’t have to earn it. We don’t have to believe the right things to receive it. God’s grace is freely given.

But, in our lesson this morning, Jesus makes clear that God’s grace is not simply a gift to receive or a reality to accept as true.

**The grace of God is the truth around we’re called to base their entire lives. It’s the way of life God yearns for us to step into.**

Granted, Jesus didn’t put it this way, but that’s what Jesus is doing here…. Inviting his followers to step out of the ways of this world… and step into the ways of grace.

“Love your enemies… do good to those who hate you…”

Step out of the ways of anger and hatred… step away from the hate that distorts you and the one you hate… and step into the way of grace that frees you… and equips you to see the image of God even in the one you can’t stand.

“If anyone strikes you on the cheek, off the other”

Step out of the way of retribution… step away from the pursuit of vengeance… and step into the way of grace that knows peace will never be found in harming your enemy, but in learning to love them.

“Don’t just love when it’s easy,” Jesus says. “Don’t just care for those who have something to offer in return. Love those who are so broken that they’ve become the hardest to love. Care for those who have nothing to offer in return.”

Step out of the ways of this world… and step into the ways of grace. Because that, Jesus knows, is what makes all the difference. When we realize grace isn’t simply something we get. It’s a way of life by which to see and taste and live in the world.

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Which, again, is challenging. Perhaps so challenging we might not be surprised the Church has worked to turn grace into an idea that costs so little… rather than a way of life that can cost so much.

Try as hard as I can… I fail at this stuff all the time. Granted, sometimes I’m blessed to see life through the lens of grace… sometimes… in my best moments… grace rules the way I live. But inevitably, and all too frequently… I end up stepping out of grace and back into the ways of this world. I end up wanting to hurt the one who hurt my family or me. I want to embarrass the one who embarrassed me. I assume I need more money to pay for college while turning my eyes on those in desperate need. I pretend I can’t do more to enact justice around me.

But that doesn’t mean I’m not a Christian. Nor does it mean I’m no longer a disciple.

Rather… this dance with grace… this pursuit to not just get grace but live grace is what sits at the heart of our faith.

And please don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. While some may try to whittle Christianity down to a system of beliefs or ideas, Christian discipleship is nothing less than a perpetual journey into grace. A perpetual wrestling with grace. A perpetual striving to let grace move us… change us… even transform us

from those who live with hate to those who only desire love…

from those who seek vengeance to those who pursue peace….

from those who seek security at all costs to those who value compassion above all else.

Because grace is not just an idea to believe or a gift we receive.

Grace is the way of life that reveals the kingdom of God. Amen.