

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
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“Wanted: Disciples”
Luke 14: 25-33
16th Sunday after Pentecost
September 4, 2016

Imagine a want ad posted for a disciple of Jesus Christ. You find the printed page posted at the Alvarez Student Union or at Summit Coffee. You see the want ad in the classifieds of the *Charlotte Observer* or posted on Craigslist.

Wanted: Disciples

Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, God incarnate, Emmanuel, is looking for ordinary people to be his disciples and to follow him. If you're interested in working for the kingdom of God here on earth, no cover letter or resume necessary; instead, ultimate loyalty and fidelity required.

Duties include spreading the Good News, making disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, and teaching followers to obey God in Jesus Christ.

The job of disciple does not pay and comes with no benefits. Vacation and sick days not included. Instead, the job of disciple comes at a cost, and you must weigh the cost before committing.

If you're still interested, contact God through prayer and through community. The Holy Spirit will be in touch.

Jesus started by just calling one person to follow him. To begin, it was just Jesus and Simon. And then came Levi the tax collector, and soon the group following Jesus grew to 12. Jesus traveled the lands preaching and healing and teaching, and before long, that party of thirteen grew to large crowds. In this passage, Jesus speaks to the crowd. He's told them of a great reversal in the Kingdom of God, and he has their attention. He has healed the sick and payed attention to the downtrodden. He has accumulated quite a following, but Jesus wants his new followers to know what they're getting into. Jesus wants the crowds to know what it means to be a disciple; Jesus wants the crowd to understand what will be asked of them – that the job of being a disciple is a great responsibility, and the cost of discipleship needs to be considered – the cost of discipleship cannot be taken lightly. Jesus tells the crowd: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”ⁱ

That word *hate* is a hard one to digest. From a young age, children are taught *hate* is an ugly word; we are taught that *hate* goes against all we know about God in Christ. *Hate* carries with it a darkness – a bitterness; it's an emotion we're ashamed we can feel; *hate* is surely a symptom of the brokenness of humanity. And yet, Jesus says to *hate* our families and life itself.

The word translated as *hate* is the Greek word *miseo*. But the word warrants a little more thought. The Presbyterian pastor Mark Davis argues that *miseo* does not mean anger or hostility; the Greek word *miseo* is not an ugly word; *miseo* is not a word that will get children in trouble if they use it. *Miseo*, Davis argues, does not carry the bitterness and darkness we associate with the English word *hate*. Rather, *miseo* indicates that a conflict is present; *miseo* is used to make a contrast. *Miseo* is used to differentiate between two things – two choices: *miseo* is used to contrast hating the one with loving, following, or clinging to the other. *Miseo* indicates the path not chosen. When one path is chosen, *hate* or *miseo* belongs to the fate of the “other.”ⁱⁱ

“Whoever comes to me and does not *mislove/hate* father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”ⁱⁱⁱ *Mislove* does not indicate hostility. And so, Jesus is not calling for hatred the way it’s understood in English. When Jesus says to hate family and hate life, he calls to question our priorities – he calls attention to the things that keep us from being his disciple. For the life of a disciple, love of God is the chosen way – following Christ is the only path. All else belongs to *mislove* – even family belongs to the “other.” Even family loses out against loyalty to God.

Jesus explains to the crowd – Whoever values family over me cannot be my disciple. Whoever would choose the wishes and expectations of parents over the dreams of God cannot be my disciple. Whoever chooses fidelity to family over loyalty to God cannot be my disciple. Whoever loves their own life more than they love God cannot be my disciple.

Jesus uses the word *hate* as a question of fidelity. Ultimate loyalty must always be to the Kingdom of God. God comes before our professions and popularity. God comes before our careers and our sports teams and even our churches. Jesus challenges us: loyalty to God even overrides both kith and kin.^{iv}

This summer, I heard Ashley Goff preach at the Montreat Youth Conference. Ashley is a minister in the United Church of Christ, and she serves as pastor at Church of the Pilgrims in Washington, D.C. In her sermons throughout the week, Ashley shared her call story. She was honest and open about a conflict in her life. In her own way, Ashley had to heed Jesus’ words about hate: she had to evaluate her priorities; she had to heed Jesus’ charge to choose discipleship over and above everything – even family.

Ashley grew up in Ohio, and she reflects that her life was *on track*. She was geared up to be a doctor or a lawyer or a banker; she would be some kind of professional with an ample salary. She would be a member in a country club and would marry someone who would also be a doctor or a lawyer or a banker. That was Ashley’s dream. It was her own dream, and it was her parents’ dream for her: to be successful, to be financially well-off, to have a career and a family – that would make them proud.

Ashley didn’t grow up in the church – not really. She attended worship, but she hated it. She was a shy kid in a large congregation, and church was an uncomfortable place for her. When she went to college, she stumbled upon the religion department and there discovered the stories of Jesus. She told us at Montreat, “I became curious about how theology is part of social transformation. I realized what I was learning about our liberating God and Jesus was impacting how I saw the world and my place in it. I started to find that God was becoming a way for me to find my own voice, my own path, my own way.”

As Ashley discovered her own path, she realized it wasn’t the path she imagined or the path her parents dreamed for her; it was not the path of a doctor or a lawyer or a banker. Ashley’s parents were appalled at her new language: the theology, the God-talk. They were baffled why her life was changing. They were dismayed that she didn’t want to be a doctor and go to a country club. They were even more shocked when Ashley announced her post-graduation plans: to serve in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps.

Ashley remembers calling her parents to share her post-graduation plan. She was excited to tell them – she’s going to live in Atlanta in an intentional community and serve the homeless and poor. And her parents replied: No. No, you’re not doing this. Why don’t you just be a banker?

Ashley collapsed onto the floor in tears. She felt a call from God – she was excited to serve with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and to work for the Kingdom of God – and her parents told her *no*. She did not have their support.^v

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother...cannot be my disciple.”

Ashley had to sort out her preferences. She had a hard decision to make. Where would her loyalty lie: the life of discipleship or the life her parents dreamed for her?

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate wife and children, brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple.”

Should she go on to Atlanta, without her parents’ approval? Should she just give in and be a banker? Life could be easier that way...

“Whoever comes to me and does not even love life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

The call to discipleship comes at a cost. It requires an examination of loyalties. It demands a reordering of priorities. Discipleship comes at a cost. Our God is indeed an awesome God and our response to God must be more than shallow appreciation. Our commitment to discipleship must be more than a flippant acknowledgment; a life following Christ cannot be a partial obedience. We are to love God with all of our heart and all of our soul and all of our mind and all of our strength.^{vi}

Ashley went against her parents' wishes. She went to Atlanta and spent a year working with the city's poor and homeless. God certainly does call disciples to be doctors and lawyers and bankers, but that wasn't God's plan for Ashley's life. Jesus' command to *hate* family is a question of loyalty. Ashley had to decide: wishes of family or loyalty to God's call on her life?

Jesus isn't calling us to shun or abandon loved ones. Jesus is calling us to identify our stumbling blocks; Jesus calls us to reorder our lives; Jesus calls us to be disciples, but Jesus warns us that the life of discipleship comes at a cost.

In the first-century Greco-Roman world, family was everything. The family you were born into determined where you would live and how you would live. Your family determined what kind of job you would have and what religion you would adhere to. Your family would determine who you would marry and with whom you would socialize. Family was the *raison d'etre* – identity, belonging, purpose.

Jesus asks so much from this crowd of would-be disciples. In inviting them to discipleship, he asks them to change their belief system, to reorient their life and thinking and living. Jesus says to be a disciple, you have to be willing to face the shock from your families at this new, radical way of life. You have to be willing to face their confusion and disappointment. You have to be willing to give God your ultimate loyalty. You have to turn to Christ for your identity, not to family.

In her sermons at Montreat, Ashley made it clear that she loves her family. She did not have to despise them in order to follow God's call, but she did have to choose the path of discipleship. Ashley does love her family, but Jesus calls to question our ultimate loyalty – and ultimate loyalty belongs to God and God alone. Jesus says, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."^{vii} Jesus challenges us to identify whatever it is that we value – whatever it is we work for and live for – whatever gives us our identity and sense of purpose. If the things, the people we value come in contrast with God's vision for the world, they must be *miseo* – hated. If the ideas, the jobs we live for contrast God's plan for our lives, they must be *miseo* – hated.

For some of us today, family may still be our *raison d'etre* – the most important reason for existence. For parents, children may be the most important – making sure they are healthy, that they go to the best grade schools, that they are in the best sports programs and the best academic clubs. For others, our careers are the reason we wake up in the morning, climbing the ladder, reaching for success, working for a happy retirement and a lasting legacy. For students, education may take top priority – high school students working hard to get into a good college; college students studying hard and working on their resumes; graduate students prepping for their careers, where they will climb the ladder and reach for success.

But the call to discipleship is a call to reorder priorities. When we answer questions about what is most important to us, Jesus is to be at the top of the list. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple."^{viii} Whoever comes to me and does not hate career and education, friends and popularity, possessions and chasing status, and yes, even success itself cannot be my disciple. Whoever comes to me and does not hate personal fulfillment and reputation, fame and admiration, money and status, and yes even national identity itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever comes to me, and does not choose the path of discipleship over all the other *miseo* – cannot be my disciple.

The want ad is still running. There are plenty of job openings. Still interested? Contact God through prayer and community, and the Holy Spirit will be in touch.

ⁱ Luke 14:26

ⁱⁱ Davis, D. Mark, "Holy Hating," *Left Behind and Loving It*, August 29, 2016, <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/09/holy-hating.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 14:26

^{iv} Ralls, Mark. *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke*, Vol. 2. Pastoral perspective, pp. 74-79

^v Goff, Ashley, "The Landscape of Liturgy: Montreat Youth Conference Sermon "The Call of Paul," *God of the Sparrow*, June 28, 2016, <http://godofthesparrow.com/the-landscape-of-liturgy-montreat-youth-conference-sermon-the-call-of-paul/>

^{vi} Duffield, Jill. "Looking into the Lectionary," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, August 29, 2016.

^{vii} Luke 14:26

^{viii} Luke 14:26