

What It Takes

Luke 14:25-35

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

"Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

(Luke 14:25-35)

A few years back, a Super Bowl commercial for Doritos and Pepsi Max was pulled before it had the chance to be aired.

That's because a lot of Christians complained that it was too offensive.

Letters were written, petitions were circulated, and some vowed never to eat Doritos or drink Pepsi again.

Given the controversial nature of this commercial,

it's probably against my better judgment to show it to you, a group of Christians.

But that's what I'm going to do,

and later, I hope you'll understand why.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpniiSFmOeI>

It's okay if you laughed, but do you see why people were upset at this commercial?

When I first saw it, I cringed.

The idea of Doritos and Pepsi selling their products

by using them for the symbol of the body and blood of Jesus?

Well, it seemed as if my deepest convictions were being mocked -

about what it means to be a Christian, about what it means to be the church.

(And just so you know, I didn't like its portrayal of pastors, either.)

But you know, the more that I thought about this commercial,

the more I thought that maybe instead of inspiring anger

at an offensive attempt to sell us something (which it surely is),

it would be more fruitful for Christians to take it as a prophetic critique of what churches are tempted to sell.

Have we settled for a snack-food Jesus, a Jesus who is palatable, easy to consume, a cheap way to fill our hungers and thirsts?
Do we proclaim a Doritos and Pepsi Max Jesus, one who gets us through those tough in-between times before we feast on something else, one who gives us what we already want so we can go on as we already were?
After the commercial was pulled, the president of the ad company who created it said he was sorry. He said, "We felt bad. Our intention was to win, not to offend."¹
To win, not to offend.
It's ironic, isn't it, that even this ad company executive's response to the controversy is worthy of further reflection.
As Christians, as a church, if our intention is to win, to win the approval of the masses so that people are drawn to us, to what we're offering for their consumption, then we've got a hole in our theology.
And the hole is this:
there's no Jesus in it.

Luke's gospel tells us that, after a series of miraculous healings and powerful teachings, Jesus had drawn large crowds who were traveling with him.
Jesus turned to those crowds and said to them,
"Whoever comes to me and does not hate their father and mother, their wife and children, their brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.
Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple."

Hate your father. Hate your mother.
Hate your sister. Hate your brother.
Hate your son. Hate your daughter.
Hate your husband. Hate your wife.
Hate yourself. Hate your life.

To say the least, Jesus certainly does not seem interested in being an Instagram influencer. After all, these words are more likely to offend people than to win people. They're jarring, even shocking. After all, we think, if Christianity is about anything, it's about supporting the family. It strikes me that what we find most offensive in these words

¹ "Controversial Spot Pulled From Doritos' Super Bowl Ad Contest," *SBJ Daily* (January 10, 2011), <https://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Daily/Issues/2011/01/10/Sponsorships-Advertising-Marketing/Controversial-Spot-Pulled-From-Doritos-Super-Bowl-Ad-Contest.aspx> [accessed September 6, 2019].

is what Jesus says about families and not that his followers must carry a cross, a symbol of capital punishment.

Surely, we think, Jesus must have been using exaggeration to make a point about priorities, namely, that we should not put our commitment to our families above our commitment to our God. That's the nugget we want to take away from this hard teaching.

The problem is, that's not what the text says.

Jesus' point was not that we've merely got to get our priorities in order.

That's a message that we can consume like snack food.

No, Jesus' point is that because a new age has come, all of our relationships have been transformed.

In Luke's gospel, just a couple chapters earlier, when someone told Jesus that his mother and brothers were waiting to see him, he replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." (Luke 8:19-21)

Yes, of course, Jesus was using hyperbole when he talked about hating our families, a common rhetorical tool used by Jewish teachers at that time.

And Jesus isn't saying that our family relationships mean nothing.

But he is saying that, in this new age that has dawned, our families, our loyalties, our loves, our very lives, are cast as wide as the cross that Jesus' disciples must carry if they want to follow him.

So what are the implications of this enlarged understanding of family?

And, even granting that Jesus was using hyperbole, why would he even use the word "hate" to contrast our more traditional understandings of family? After all, couldn't he have just said that we are to love everybody?

A few years ago, a friend gave me this book.

*On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society.*²

Sarah sarcastically told me that the title makes it seem like a good beach read.

No, it wasn't easy to read.

The book was written by a former army Ranger and paratrooper, Lt. Col. Dan Grossman, and it was meant to be a study on how people learn to accept and even participate in what seems to be something we are disinclined to do on our own; that is, to kill another human being.

Grossman writes with much sympathy for soldiers -- he's a soldier himself, but he does so that more people understand the cost and the danger of war.

Grossman quotes studies showing that human beings are, for the most part, averse to killing another human being, even in war.

In fact, Grossman writes, numerous studies have shown

² Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Little, Brown and Co.: Boston, 1996).

that, for the vast majority of combatants throughout history, when caught in a moment when they could or should fire to kill an enemy, they didn't. In World War I, one study estimated that forty percent of soldiers in combat never even fired their weapon.

Another study said that in World War II, only 15 to 20 percent of the men would pull the trigger when caught in a firefight, and most fighter pilots never shot anyone down or even tried to do so.³

And so, the military was faced with a problem – how do we get soldiers to fire their weapons at the enemy? So after a whole lot of research, the military found two primary and related ways to address this problem, ways that dramatically increased soldiers' firing rates in the Vietnam War. One is to increase the bonds of accountability between soldiers and their unit, and the second is to increase the distance with the enemy.

It's not primarily a sense of self-preservation that motivates people to kill. It's love, a special kind of love, says one military psychologist.⁴ And increasing distance with the enemy -- physically, morally, or culturally -- makes it easier for soldiers to fire their weapons.

Violence lies not in our hatreds, but in our loves: family members, friends, platoon members, neighborhoods, country. We are loyal to those closest to us.

And, from a distance, you look nothing like a friend.
From a distance, I can deny your humanity.
From a distance, I cannot hear your pain.
Because of our deepest fears of losing our deepest loves,
we are, from a distance, willing to kill other people's families to protect our own.

It's because of this shadow side of love that Jesus uses the word "hate" to contrast how we are to live in the new age. We are no longer under the powers of the old age. In Christ, all have been made a part of the same family – whether they know it or not. In Christ, our love extends all the way to enemy. In Christ, the distance separating people from God and each other has been destroyed. In Christ, our love is the basis of peace and not the source of violence.

This love, of course, comes with a cost, and it looks like a cross. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, Jesus said, cannot be my disciple. After all, no one would begin building a tower without considering its cost.

³ Ibid., xv, 3-4, 184.

⁴ Ibid., 150.

And no king would wage war without considering whether they had enough to win it.

Jesus' point is simply that we cannot follow him
while holding on to our attachments in the way that we did before –
whether it's to our family, to our country, or to our possessions.
In Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we have learned that the heart of love is nonviolence.
On the cross, Jesus showed us what love looks like.
Love extends beyond our traditional loyalties.
Love extends to our neighbors and even to our enemies.

Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illnesses, with physical pain or trying relationships.
It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus.

This past Friday, a number of you gave blood here at the church.
There are many reasons why people give blood,
but I think, as Christians, giving blood demonstrates what the love of Christ is all about.
We give something of ourselves without preconditions of where it will go and how it will be used.
We give part of our body, our blood, to others because Jesus first offered his body and blood to us.

This Wednesday will mark eighteen years since September 11, 2001.
You know, there were good things that happened that day.
Babies were born.
Friends were forgiven.
Families were reunited.
Believers were baptized.
It's important to remember that.

Yet, to most people in this country, just saying that date, September 11, 2001,
brings to mind the images that they saw on television that day,
images that were live and then looped,
images they'd rather forget.

I still haven't seen most of those images.
On that date, Sarah and I were in living in Mozambique in a tiny, rural village called Cambine.
The electricity was off, and I had just brushed my teeth to get ready for bed,
Then I turned on our small shortwave radio.
That's how we heard.
In the dark, with crickets chirping outside our window,
the fading, crackling sound of a newscaster on Voice of America
gave us news that our minds had a hard time believing.
We were glued to that small radio,
but then the broadcast was abruptly cut off,
and then there was dead air,
and then classical music took its place.

We had no idea what was happening.

We felt far, far away from home, probably more so than at any other time during our years in Africa.

We wanted to be with our families.

We yearned for more information.

We were far away from home, yet, in some ways, we felt that we were being attacked as the crickets chirped right outside our window.

On September 12, 2001, there was a knock on our door.

And a group of our friends quietly filed into our house.

Our friends sat with us.

They talked with us.

And they prayed for our families.

They prayed that God would comfort those who were suffering in the United States.

And they prayed for the world leaders – for wisdom and restraint.

Above all, they prayed for peace, for even then, just a day after, they knew full well the violence that might, and then did, follow.

When I looked around the room,

I remembered the stories that our friends had shared with us.

It struck me that these same people had seen and experienced the type of suffering that they now asked God to comfort in others.

But their suffering came in the midst of Mozambique's seventeen year civil war.

In our house, I saw people who had been marched for tens of miles at gunpoint.

I saw mothers and fathers who lost children.

I saw a woman who had been left for dead amid family members' bodies.

Although I sometimes lament my distance from the United States on September 11, 2001,

I would not exchange my absence for what I experienced on September 12, 2001.

Praying with these people at this time is something that I will never forget.

These were my sisters and brothers, my mothers and fathers, and they embodied Jesus to me.

Jesus will not be distributed as snack food to the masses.

Jesus offers his body and blood for the meal that reconciles us as members of God's family.

After all, as Paul writes in Ephesians,

through the cross, Christ has created in himself one new humanity, thus making peace.

He has reconciled all to God in one body.

Christ proclaimed peace to those who were far off, and peace to those who were near.

Because of that, we are no longer strangers and aliens--

we are citizens with the saints,

we are members of the household of God. (Ephesians 2:14-19)

We are members of the household of God.

That is, we are members of God's family.

And we pick up the cross that Jesus carried before us,
the cross that demonstrates the width, length, height, and depth of God's love.
And the cross extends to all.⁵

⁵ In preparing this sermon, I was inspired by Stanley Hauerwas, "Hating Mothers as the Way to Peace," *Journal for Preachers* 11:4 (1988), 17-21. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdar&AN=ATLA0000801759&site=ehost-live.