

THE COST AND THE JOY

--There is an old story told in Buddhist circles about the visit on the part of the king to the monastery of the great Zen master Lin Chi.

The king is astonished to see that there are more than 10,000 monks living there with the famous sage.

Curious about the exact number of monks, the king asks the master, "How many disciples do you have?"

Lin Chi thinks for a moment, then replies, "At the very most, four or five."

Ouch!

Apparently, it is one thing to be a member of the religious club, as it were, little better than a spiritual groupie of sorts; it is quite another thing to be an authentic practitioner or follower.

--While the story may be Buddhist, its point is no different with respect to our own Christian tradition. That seems clearly indicated in this morning's reading, where Jesus defines--in somewhat unsettling terms, it must be confessed--what the conditions are for true discipleship.

"Oh?" Jesus essentially remarks to the crowd (which is to say, to us). "So you wish to follow me? Very well, then. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, let them take up their own cross(es), and then let them follow me" (8.34).

In short, my way is the way of the cross. Therefore, if you're truly serious about following me, then you will have to come to grips with your own crosses. If you are to be one of my disciples, there simply is no other way.

Surely, such declarations as these are enough to give even the most gung-ho, "wannabe" follower pause. Just what does Jesus have in mind when he drops in front of us a challenge like that?

I mean, isn't an agonizing dying on a cross how the Romans kill Jesus? What possible application, then, does that image have for us, specifically connected to our conscientiousness in following him?

--By way of illustration, imagine that you're, say, at a concert, and at the intermission you head to the lobby to stretch your legs and maybe make a quick "pit stop." As you maneuver your way through the crowd, you inadvertently step into the path of someone that you don't notice is coming from another direction. The two of you are startled by the near-collision. As you automatically begin to offer your apologies, it is then that you recognize the other as the person who, of all the people in the whole world, you can't stand the most.

Given the abruptly tense situation, what do you do next? Well, what would Jesus do--you know, the "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" Jesus, the "if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other" Jesus? What would he do?

I'm guessing this isn't the first sermon that you've ever heard. We know very well what he would do, and frankly the thought of having to do something like that would just "kills" us. That, I'm guessing, would qualify as a cross.

Were we to do in that moment what Jesus would do, we might just evidence that we are, well, a disciple.

--Or imagine that, say, you are challenged with the prospect of supporting financially some proposition that would benefit others in your community, or in the wider world. In order for this endeavor to succeed, it will require people to reach deeper into their pockets than they are accustomed to doing. We figure that we give our five dollars a week to the church, so we're already doing our parts, right? What more can anyone reasonably expect from us?

Given the clear probing going on in the direction of our checkbooks, what do you do next? Well, if Jesus were personally as well off as we are--no more or no less so--what would he do? You know, the "where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" Jesus, the "this poor widow has put in more than all of them" Jesus. What would he do?

We know very well what he would do, and, in all honesty, the thought of having to do that ourselves just "kills" us. Sounds to me like that might be a cross.

Were we to respond liberally, we could be indicating that we actually are disciples.

--Examples like this could go on being multiplied--but what would be the point, since we know full well that they're all going to wind up at the same place of uneasiness for us?

Life, you see, is full of situations where we are required to choose--to choose between that which serves us and that which benefits others; between that which adds to the privileges and security we already possess and that which provides more equitably for those in the world who are disadvantaged; between that which means our taking of the easy path and going with whatever supports our status quo and that which will entail some discomfort on the tougher path where we are obliged to give way, give over, and give up far more than we, left to ourselves, would ever prefer to do.

Each time we are compelled to make such a decision, we demonstrate plainly whether we are truly a disciple, or not. At such times, effectively, we are choosing between picking up that cross and carrying it, or letting it lay right there on the ground, as we step over it and walk on.

Being genuinely a disciple is being more than just a member of the "Jesus fan club." It can be expected to require something from us that represents sacrifice--a being courteous when we want nothing more than to be hateful, a being generous when we want nothing better than to be selfish, and so on and on--all for which the cross is a perfect symbol.

--The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ reads in part: "You [God] call us into Your church, to accept the cost and joy of discipleship." Given this morning's considerations, it seems a particularly pertinent line.

In all candor, discipleship, as we are hearing it described by Jesus, sounds like mostly cost. However, as those who walk the path of Christ know well, the wonderful mystery is that it is in the willingness to shoulder the cost that one discovers that joy. It is the satisfied joy that results from having done the difficult right thing at the most impossible time and in opposition to the greatest personal resistance to doing so.

--You know, I wonder how many persons are worshipping with us this morning? Where's our official counter?

How many souls are with us today?

I wonder how many here are disciples?

Hopefully more than four or five.