

“Never Fully Formed”
September 7, 2025
Scripture: Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

I have to admit, I’ve always been baffled over what to say about this reading in Luke. “Hate” is a very strong word in our usage. A lot of parents tell their kids it’s okay to dislike someone, but they shouldn’t say they “hate” another person, no matter how much it might be warranted. We stay away from that word as much as we can, at least that’s how life used to be. So, knowing that, I began to wonder if maybe the translation is just a little over the top. But the word in Greek that’s used is “*misei*” from the verb “*miseo*,” which means “to hate.” The word in Greek carries all the same connotations it does in English.

That means we’re left with this sort of contradiction that the same Jesus who tells his wannabe disciples they must hate everyone in their lives also tells his followers they must love their enemies and not hate them. I can’t accept that the gospel Jesus taught is that inconsistent. It seems to me what Jesus is doing is using an extreme expression to drive home the depth of what it means to commit your life to following him. This is not a casual commitment. It’s not something you decide in the spur of the moment. It takes real thought and real understanding to live in the way he lives and teaches.

In November this year one of the Adult Education classes will be exploring Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous book *The Cost of Discipleship*. This is probably the most famous thing he wrote that was published while he was living. If you’ve never read the book, you may still be familiar with the idea of “cheap grace” that it talks about. Cheap grace is what Bonhoeffer called the doctrinal Christianity of his day in Germany and the West. So long as you agreed with the doctrines of the church, nodded along with the creeds, you were safe. He saw this as an erosion of the faith Jesus taught. Bonhoeffer believed faith had to be backed up by action, that we are called to make real, material changes in our lives when we become disciples of Christ.

As Jesus makes clear in this passage, following him is not easy. It could involve letting go of long-held relationships. As he says in other places, he hasn’t come to bring peace, but a sword. But you may notice he doesn’t limit his warning just to family and community, but says anyone who doesn’t hate even their own life cannot be his follower. That’s a pretty high bar to clear. And I doubt many of us are able to do it.

I’ve never been called on to turn my back on my family or put my life on the line for the sake of discipleship. The most I can hope for is to keep my mind open to reflecting on what’s happening around me and try to be compassionate toward people who are vulnerable or in need. That’s not exactly hating my life, but at least it’s an attempt to put others’ needs ahead of my own.

And that may be the most we can hope for. Following Jesus is a lifelong project. It doesn’t end with Confirmation or when a person is ordained as an elder or deacon, or even minister of word and sacrament. We are continually being formed by the Holy Spirit as we follow Jesus, but we are never fully formed. That means we have a responsibility to remain open

and aware of how the Spirit is working on us to bring us closer to the life of Jesus. And in turn, it means we need to understand what Jesus' life looks like, what qualities we need to cultivate.

Just prior to this passage we can find one expression of those qualities. He tells a story about someone who threw a party and invited their friends, but none of them came. So servants were sent out to go to every highway and byway and bring in anyone they could find. Rather than just a chosen few being welcomed to the feast, anyone willing to accept is welcome. Jesus' life is an invitation to welcome everyone into God's circle of grace, no matter what their condition or their history, no matter where they're from, what they've done or who they love. Jesus welcomes anyone willing to accept his invitation, and so should we.

But that kind of welcome can be risky. Not everyone thinks the church should be a place where all are welcomed and affirmed. Following Jesus means welcoming refugees and asylum seekers; it means welcoming Muslims and Jews, Hindus and Buddhists. It means opening our hearts to welcome people who are gay, lesbian and transgender. It means regarding those around us who are different from us with compassion and not suspicion. When we do that, we may encounter the world's hatred and fear, and like the person in Jesus' story we may have to accept that some will not come to the party. Understanding the cost of discipleship includes being prepared to accept the world's rejection.

And understanding our condition as people struggling to do our best as disciples includes recognizing we may not always get it right. Because we're not fully formed, we are always reliant on God's grace to re-shape us when we fail. That's the promise Jeremiah offers his people. When the potter's pot goes bad, it's collapsed and re-formed. This is what God designs to do with Israel. When they follow the way of Torah, a way of compassion and justice, they become the vessel God the potter intends them to be. But when they fail, when they live in ways that cause oppression and exploitation and misery, they are flattened and formed again. Notice, God doesn't throw them away, the potter doesn't discard the clay. God won't give up on Israel, no matter how far they stray, but God will form them again and make them new.

Someone said once that as Christians we aren't called to be perfect; we're called to be faithful. And even though Jesus' words sound absolute, his ministry displays an acceptance that should give us hope. We know who we are; we know how easily we're taken in by a world that promises comfort so long as we're willing to ignore injustice and cruelty. But even though being faithful to the way of Jesus is a challenge, ignoring those Jesus welcomes is not an option. We live in a world that wants our allegiance, that pulls us away from the path Jesus calls us to walk. Resisting that pull so we can follow him is a struggle we face every day. But we don't struggle alone. We have the support of this community around us to remind us who we're called to be and we have God's Spirit working on us, forming us over and over to shape us into the disciples Jesus calls. Open your hearts, friends, and hear Jesus' voice calling you to compassion, to generosity, to love and acceptance, calling you to follow him in the way of peace.

Amen