

“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”

It seems to me that this must have been the response of many who came to listen to Jesus: disciples, people in the crowd, family members, friends, critics and enemies. What is it about the sayings of Jesus that make them hard to accept? I think the answer is pretty evident: Jesus’s words tend to run counter to dominant cultural values and the stories that uphold them – both in his time and ours. They require us, if we are to be his followers, to reorder our life, to reexamine our decisions about lifestyle and jobs and to question how and on what we spend our money, or where we live, among whom do we spend our time. They’re meant to poke us, prod us, prick us. As Dorothy Day once noted about the Catholic Worker, so too we can say about Jesus: his words may comfort the afflicted but they **afflict the comfortable**.

His words, his message, the gospel he preached, the way he lived – all these tended to undermine the values and truths that we’re coaxed into believing without questions; values and truths promoted by those in power, whether religious, economic, political or otherwise. But to take Jesus at his word – to listen to Jesus and to follow him – means living a life that contrasts, often dramatically, often at great risk, with the dominant values of the culture in which we live. The stream we live in will carry us the way it wants us to go unless we swim against it. And such swimming can oftentimes be exhausting. “This saying is hard; who can accept it?”

Even as a church, we often ask so little of each other that our discipleship to Jesus ends up devolving into personal piety or morality, without ever disrupting the systems that stand in stark opposition to the gospel of Jesus. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard lamented that for the early followers of Jesus, their discipleship could, quite literally, mean everything – losing their livelihood, leaving their family, arrest, even death; but now, today, to call oneself a disciple of Jesus means, essentially, nothing at all. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr, wrote an entire book on the “cost of discipleship,” musing like Kierkegaard on how “cheap” discipleship to Jesus had become in the church. Maybe it’s because we have ceased to take seriously the “hard sayings” of Jesus, having heard them so often they no longer have the power to unsettle us and disrupt business as usual.

It is no coincidence that John gives us a little insight about what this meant even for the followers of Jesus in his own time. Toward the end of today’s passage, John alludes to the fact that “many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him.”

How often do Jesus’s words unsettle us, make us uneasy, and ask us to be different, to risk something in order to follow him more closely? Or are we content to “return” to our regular way of life and no longer accompany him?

~ Johnny Zokovitch