

JUST FAR ENOUGH

Jer. 18:1-11 / Lk. 14:25-33

In land far away and a time long ago, there lived a king who received news that there lived a prophet in his land who watched over a great treasure. So the king set out to meet this prophet. When the king arrived in the prophet's village, he demanded of his subject to see this treasure in his care. The prophet led the king to a door hewn into the side of a great mountain. "Is it in there?" the king inquired. "Yes, sire, it is. But before I show you, I have one question." "What is the question?" the king wanted to know. "How far are you prepared to venture in?" the prophet asked. And the king answered: "Just far enough to say that I have been there." ... Just far enough to say that I have been there.

Some of the most challenging words of Jesus for me have always been these: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brother and sister, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Harsh words. I get that "family" can really get on our nerves—but hate? I probably threw "I hate you" in my

father's and mother's faces more than once when I was growing up, but I had no idea what "hate" meant when I uttered the phrase. After all, I was just a kid.

But as so many other times as well, what Jesus wanted to convey got lost in translation. In the Semitic world of his time, "hate" meant *detachment*. In all the great spiritual traditions, "detachment" is used to describe freedom from desire. In the *Upanishad's* of ancient India, for example, we read: "When all the desires that cling to the heart are surrendered, a mortal becomes immortal." The Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote: "Whatever desire wishes to get, it purchases at the cost of the soul."

In our day, we are more familiar with a different word for the desire that would purchase anything, even if it cost its soul. That word is *addiction*. We usually associate addiction with substance abuse. However, in a more fundamental, and biblical sense, addiction is everything we pledge our allegiance to other than God. Addiction is like the king who wants to get to the treasure at

any cost. But when he is faced with making a decision how far he would go to obtain this treasure, he cannot get himself to relinquish control and let the prophet lead him. Instead, the king is only prepared to venture far enough so he can say he has been there. Or, addiction is like a person who wants to be a disciple of Jesus but cannot let go of family nor of the comfortable life he or she is leading to follow him. Addiction is like saying, I want to follow Jesus ... but only far enough so I can say, "I have been there, I have done that."

The late great spiritual director and psychiatrist Gerald May understands addiction as our human predicament to struggle with unhealthy attachments. He writes: "Addiction exists wherever persons are internally compelled to give energy to things that are not their true desires. ... We succumb because the energy of our desire becomes attached, nailed, to specific behaviors, objects, or people. Attachment, then, is the process that enslaves desire and creates the state of addiction."

In other words, once we give our energy and desires to something, it sticks to us like glue. Here are some of the things we might be “addicted” to: family (as Jesus points out); money (Jesus has a lot to say about that); country; work; education; diet; exercise; church ... the list is endless. All these things, and more, are what Jesus wants us to “hate,” or better, what Jesus says we need to detach ourselves from. Gerald May is again very helpful here: “An authentic spiritual understanding of detachment [or hate] devalues neither desire nor the objects of desire. Instead, it aims at correcting one’s own anxious grasping in order to free oneself for committed relationship to God.”

All of this is nothing new. The medieval German mystic Meister Eckart knew that detachment “enkindles the heart, awakens the spirit, stimulates our longings, and shows us where God is.” If only we could follow the prophet all the way into the mountain instead of holding back, saying, “I just want to go far enough so I can say I have been there.”

Knowing how hard it is to give up our addictions—all the things we cling to for dear life, all the things or people who can never save us—Jesus ends this parable with hyperbole. “Therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Wham! That’s like Jesus slamming the door hewn into the side of the mountain right into our face. But I don’t think Jesus wants to put an insurmountable roadblock in our way of discipleship.

When I began my journey of discipleship, when I stood in front of the door of the mountain and said, “OK, Lord, I want to see this treasure and I am in all the way,” I had absolutely no idea what it was I said yes to. I am a good thirty years into this journey. In order to follow Jesus, I left my country of origin, I live in a place I had never heard of before, I speak a language which is not my native one, I went to seminary and became a pastor (something I thought was only for geeks when I was young), I am engaged in ministry in the midst of a pandemic ... What’s next? Locusts?

Rivers of blood? When you think back about your journey of faith, the moment you said “yes” to your journey with God, where did that journey lead you? What did you “lose” and what did you “find” along the way? And where does it lead all of us together here in this place at this time? What is it that we are addicted to and need to detach ourselves from in order to travel lighter with Jesus? Which possessions or other obstacles—tangible or intangible—do we need to give up so we can see clearer where God is?

Like the potter in Jeremiah’s parable, God fashions us over and over and over again on this journey. We are each unique art works of God which are never finished in this lifetime. Instead, we are given the freedom to experience what it means to be molded by God into what we were created to be. Gerald May again:

“Detachment ... seeks a liberation of desire, an enhancement of passion, the freedom to love with all one’s being, and the willingness to bear the pain such love can bring.”

The journey of our detachments, or the journey to the cross, as the writer of Luke's gospel would put it, goes much further than we might be willing to take. But when we finally have given up our desires from whatever keeps us away from the source of life, when we shed our possessions along the way, we are finally free for the desire that matters the most: our desire of God.

Rev. Dieter U. Heinzl, PhD

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church (USA), St. Louis, MO

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