**September 8, 2019 Rev. Rhonda Blevins, DMIN**

**Side Effects Include**

**Luke 14:25-33**

*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.”*

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Every now and then my husband and I will sit down and watch TV together. There’s a phenomenon these days that I don’t remember when I was younger: pharmaceutical ads. These commercials come on and list a bunch of symptoms and then they’ll say, “If you suffer from one or more of these symptoms, you might have \_\_\_\_\_\_.” And no matter what the disease is, my husband has it. There could five people on earth with this disease, and my husband will be one of them. He will look over at me and say, “I’ve got it. I have all of those symptoms.” I’ll look back over at him and say, “You do not have ovarian cancer. You don’t even have ovarians!”

*They got this prescription stuff that they advertise on TV and I swear, half the time, the side effects are fifty times worse than what the medicine cures. It’s like, “Try new Flor-o-flor. For itchy, watery eyes, it’s Flor-o-flor. Side effects may include nausea, vomiting, water weight gain, lower back pain, receding hairline, eczema, septoria, psoriasis, itching, chaffing clothing, liver spots, blood clots, ringworm, excessive body odor, uneven tire wear, pyorrhea, gonorrhea, diarrhea, halitosis, scoliosis, loss of bladder control, hammertoe, the shanks, low sperm count, warped floors, cluttered drawers, hunchback, heart attack, low resale value on your home, feline leukemia, athlete’s foot, head lice, clubfoot, MS, MD, VD, fleas, anxiety, sleeplessness, drowsiness, poor gas mileage, tooth decay, parvo, warts, unibrow, lazy eye, fruit flies, chest pains, clogged drains, hemorrhoids, dry heaving and sexual dysfunction.” I’m watching it going, “You know what, I’ll just have itchy, watery eyes.”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

My thanks to Jeff Foxworthy for that material; you might be a redneck if you quote Jeff Foxworthy in a sermon.

Prescriptions come with warnings of side effects—so does faith.

In the scripture lesson we read a moment ago, we hear Jesus warning his followers of the side effects of following him. “If you follow me, you’ll lose everyone, you’ll lose everything, and you’ll probably die by Roman execution.” Some folks, upon hearing those side effects probably said, “You know what, I’ll just have itchy, watery eyes.”

Jesus was obviously not into the church growth movement; he was not offering free doughnuts and all the fresh coffee you could drink. “Hate my father and mother? Die by state execution? My, look at the time. See ya!”

On one hand, this was one of the passages you could use to have a little fun with people who claim to be biblical literalists:

*“Do you love your kids?”*

*“Of course,” they will answer.*

*“Whoever does not hate their children can’t be Jesus’ disciple.”*

*“Jesus didn’t really mean that. He was using hyperbole.”*

*“Oh, I see. You don’t read that passage literally. Hey, that’s a pretty nice car you have there, but Jesus said you have to give up all your possessions to follow him. Let me help you along in your discipleship and take that car off your hands.”*

*“Jesus didn’t really mean that.”*

*“Oh, I see. You don’t read that passage literally either.”*

On the other hand, this passage was used quite effectively by an angry atheist who engaged with me on Twitter a while back. Now don’t get me wrong, there are a lot of wonderful people who happen to be atheists out there—this guy, however, was an angry atheist. When I agreed with all of his criticisms of the church and even disavowed the narrow theology of his upbringing, he asked me why I was still a Christian. “Jesus!” I responded. “He was the embodiment of love!” He countered, “Or a cult leader who told his followers to hate their families.”

What did Jesus mean when he told his followers that they must hate father, mother, sister, brother, spouse, kids? What did he mean when he told them that they must give up all of their possessions?

One tip when you come upon difficult passages to understand like this is to ask, “Is this passage descriptive or prescriptive?” Is it prescriptive, in the sense that these are commands—Jesus prescribing what is required to be his follower for all time? Or is this passage descriptive, describing what is likely to happen to those who would follow Jesus on the journey.

I read this passage as descriptive. Follow Jesus, and the “side effects” might be loss of relationships, loss of possessions, and possible execution.

Father Richard Rohr offers some additional help for understanding the meaning of this passage. He says that one of the major blocks getting in the way of discipleship or spiritual growth . . .

*. . . is what we would now call the “collective,” the crowd, our society, or our extended family. Some call it the crab bucket syndrome—you try to get out, but the other crabs just keep pulling you back in. What passes for morality or spirituality in the vast majority of people’s lives is the way everybody they grew up with thinks. Some would call it conditioning or even imprinting. Without very real inner work, most folks never move beyond it. You might get beyond it in a negative sense, by reacting or rebelling against it [using various methods of escape], but it is much less common to get out of the crab bucket in a positive way. That is what we want here. Jesus uses quite strong words to push us out of the family nest and to name a necessary suffering at the most personal, counterintuitive and sentimental level possible.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Wess Daniels adds to this: “In other words, Jesus quietly tells us that the cost of wholeness is to break rank. It is to refuse to play the roles that have been so destructive in your life. It is to refuse to go along with the game. It is to accept that you no longer need validation from the family in order to be who you were meant to be.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

It’s helpful to know the context in which Jesus offers this difficult teaching. Today we’re in Luke chapter 14. Back in chapter 9, we learn that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” where he would lead two staged protests: one targeting Roman authorities as he mocked Pilate by riding into the city on a donkey, the other targeting Temple authorities as he turned over tables in the temple.

This is not the kind of thing you plan if you’re trying to maintain the status quo. And under the strong arm of Rome, this is not something you plan if you want to keep your life. Those who would follow Jesus on this journey to Jerusalem were taking a great risk. Mother would likely not approve. Rome would certainly not approve. Jesus is saying to those walking with him to Jerusalem, “No sugar-coating here. Let me be crystal clear: there’s a chance you could lose everything. Don’t join me unless you’re ready. Don’t follow me unless you hate the life you’ve been living, because when we enter Jerusalem, there’s no turning back. Life will never be the same.”

Luke doesn’t tell us in this passage, but we learn later in Luke 18 that the Rich Young Ruler couldn’t stick with Jesus after a similar teaching. There were probably others who left the fold that day to find a church that advertises free doughnuts and all the fresh coffee you can drink.

What does this mean for us today? Jesus isn’t literally walking to Jerusalem and the Roman government doesn’t have any authority over most of us. So what’s our takeaway? What really matters here?

Here’s what matters: saying “yes” to following Jesus no matter the cost. The journey with Jesus, the path of spiritual transformation, it will change you. The crab bucket is a powerful force—few are able to climb out beyond culture, beyond family—to grow beyond the status quo. I know a grown woman in her 60’s marginalized by her friends at the Country Club when she started getting more serious about her faith. The crab bucket would pull her back in; she is finding strength to resist the tug.

The hymn we sang together earlier, “Will You Come and Follow Me,” asks questions that matter. Jesus sings to us through the hymn:

*Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?*

*Will you go where you don’t know and never be the same?*

*Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?*

*Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?*

*Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?*

*Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?[[4]](#endnote-4)*

Will you follow Jesus? There is healing in the journey if you can endure the side effects.

1. Jeff Foxworthy, Blue Collar Comedy Tour, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSdNMRtvq5g>. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Richard Rohr, *Falling Upward*, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. C. Wess Daniels, “Hating Father and Mother: Jesus’ Advice for Family Conflict,” <http://gatheringinlight.com/2013/01/21/hating-father-and-mother-jesus-on-family-conflict-luke-1426-27/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John L. Bell & Graham Maule, “Will You Come and Follow Me.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)