

The cost of doing business. It's a phrase that we use more than we should - to cover all manner of situations. The 'cost' of something may be measured in dollars, or difficulty or even inconvenience (other). And as we fall deeper and deeper into the trap that is capitalism without restriction, the temptation to measure everything with money is a real problem.

In this morning's gospel, there is an unfortunate mixing of metaphors that doesn't help us shake this off - 'Do the math' Jesus says - like the person who builds a grand structure without enough resources to finish the job. "Work it out" Jesus says to the combatant in a public fight who may have underestimated their opponent's strength. Measure your chances of success, and do the beneficial thing. Don't fight. Don't build.

These are the lessons we tend to take away. But the lesson Jesus would teach us doesn't start with calculation. It starts with relationship.

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Hate is a strong word - and some of us are hesitant to use it - especially since we're trying to follow Jesus, who had so much to say about love. But Jesus is making a strong point here, so strong words are in order.

Jesus words are inviting us to think about our relationships; why they matter and how they came to be. Jesus is challenging the way we see the world, and this morning's reading is the one that hits closest to home.

"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." It's not really an encouraging statement, is it...and if Jesus were speaking literally, we'd have a problem. I certainly don't qualify as a disciple of Jesus is this is the chief requirement.

But the word for hate in the New Testament is most often set opposite one of the words for love - hate is the dark side of the relational spectrum. And while love seems absent in this passage, the association is strong in our minds. I wonder if Jesus is talking about an equation that doesn't balance.

Hate those closest to you...hate life itself...give up your possessions...Jesus words are jarring here, but they are a call out to the dangers of self-involvement. Our families - our stuff - our way of life; aren't these usually the most precious things to us? And when Jesus bluntly calls us to turn our backs on what we call precious, is it possible that we are being asked to involve ourselves in something bigger?

No, I don't believe Jesus is recruiting monastic missionaries - utterly selfless folks who launch themselves into a cause that takes them away from a life in the family fold. Yes, there are those whose response to God's call does take them away, to the peril of family bonds and worldly pleasures, but Jesus IS asking us to alter our view of the world.

The strange thing about a stable family unit, is that it gives us the freedom to say ‘well, we’ve always done things this way...” Change is carefully managed and only rarely encouraged, But Jesus has come to cry out for change, and those who belong to ‘the way we’ve always done it’ crowd won’t help make that change happen.

This, then, is the Jesus calculation: all that talk of ‘doing the math’ and ‘hating the stability of home and hearth and family’ is meant to shake up our view of the world. Change is life, and the life-bringing change that Jesus represents cannot happen if our comfort, our reputations or our pride is more important to us than the work that Jesus is proposing.

And it’s difficult work. Jesus reimagines the social order (in the parable from last week about who should be on the dinner guest list) Jesus asks us to follow him into something new - something less certain than the comfort of family and the well-ordered security of ‘we’ve always done it that way.’ The possessions - the certainty - the established way of things - all these are secondary in Jesus’ thinking. Because in the course of ‘the way we’ve always done it,’ too many folks get left behind. Too many relationships are ignored. Too many of God’s beloved are cast aside.

Hate that, Jesus says. The ‘ordinary.’ The ‘good old days.’ The ‘way we’ve always done it.’ All these will be gradually and gratefully left behind by those who would follow Jesus. And there is a cost associated with this new way of thinking. It is difficult to set aside the certainty of the ‘good old days’ for what seems like chaotic change. There are those who will urge you to cling more tightly to the past out of fear for the future. It may be that those you love most will understand the least about your new way of thinking - and that is always hard. Figure it out, says Jesus.

Decide which would be better: a world where we can assure ourselves “Well, at least I’m ok.” Or would we rather a world that saw social boundaries overcome by compassion and empathy - where our desire for sharing and hospitality helped create new relationships and foster understanding across social, ethnic and religious boundaries.

The world view that Jesus promotes is broader, deeper and more humane than any we have made for ourselves. The cross he invites us to carry may not take us to our death, but it might help bring about the death of division and selfishness, racism and hatred.

It’s an invitation to consider. It’s a risk worth taking.