Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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"Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matt 10:39).

One sign that a movement is radical is that it creates intergenerational tensions. Today’s Gospel passage suggests that the teachings of Jesus created rifts within families and between parents and their children. Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace, but division.

We need only think of young people coming home and telling their parents that they have decided to follow this new teacher from the hill country of Galilee who has told them that obedience to God is more important than family loyalty, or that human needs are greater than keeping the Sabbath.

We imagine the reactions of fathers who had prepared their sons to take over the family business, to settle down and provide grandchildren and bring pride to the family name. Instead, their heirs were abandoning family interests and running off to live like vagabonds with someone who promised them glory if they lost their lives for his sake. What did the Beatitudes sound like to parents who wanted their children to be successful and secure? Blessed are the poor, the meek, the persecuted … utter nonsense.

As Jesus became more and more controversial and was denounced by the religious establishment for consorting with sinners, touching lepers and social outcasts, so also his disciples became outcasts. Women who followed Jesus were held morally suspect, as social renegades.

The early church must have experienced these tensions when the Gospels were being composed. Formally ejected from the synagogues, under surveillance by Roman authorities, Christian believers were risking their lives to proclaim someone who had been crucified by the empire as a criminal, calling him their risen Lord and God. In times of actual persecution, families must have been torn apart by fear and conflict.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brilliant young German theologian who opposed the rise of Hitler and National Socialism, knew the cost of discipleship. After trying to fly beneath the radar as he helped organize the resistance, he knew his faith would eventually lead to his arrest and execution. He lived against the tide of national hysteria and the lies of racial supremacy, and by his death he left a legacy of conscience and courage that has defined radical faith.

Do we recognize the outline of these same tensions in our own time? If our own discipleship costs us little, perhaps we have yet to experience the presence of Jesus in our lives, to hear his call to choose him above every other value and principle. His radical commitment was God’s option for the poor. Their need for good news was the spirit that anointed Jesus and defined his mission. Proof that we are his disciples now is that we hear the cry of the poor, the captive, the oppressed, the refugee, the prisoner, and that we care as much about them as he did.

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