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“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:28).

Luke begins today’s Gospel by telling us that “Great crowds were traveling with Jesus.” By this time in his slow journey south from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus is well aware of what is awaiting him there. He has tried unsuccessfully to prepare his disciples for the violent reception he will face, his rejection and death. The enthusiastic crowds need to be prepared as well.

Jesus turns to tell them just what the cost of discipleship looks like. He confronts them with the question: “Do you understand what you are undertaking? Don’t start if you can’t finish.” The two parables of the builder who runs out of money and the king who faces an approaching king with an army twice the size of his own are meant to sober up the people who think they are about to ride into Jerusalem in triumph.

No, if they persist in following him, they will have to give up their loyalty to family, exchange their fantasies of easy glory for the hard reality of getting their shoulders under the weight of their own lives, and press on to the end. Jesus is about to lay down his life out of love for others and for the nation. If anyone is not ready to go the distance, they should drop out now.

The “cross” Jesus spoke of was the instrument of his death by crucifixion, which the evangelists knew after the fact, but in its original context it also meant the precise burden of every person’s existence and responsibilities. If you couldn’t carry yourself, then you could never carry others.

Our obligations in love define the personal cross most of us carry. This means our family, parents, siblings, spouse, children, in-laws, relatives and friends. Whether burden or joy, we promise to commit to real people, to be there for them. The circle of obligation extends to neighbors and colleagues, networking us all the way to the margins, to the weak, the needy, the stranger and even our enemies.

St. Paul summarizes our full allegiance to Jesus by telling us we fulfill all our obligations if we love another. Love of neighbor is the ultimate test of whether we are carrying our cross and following Jesus. “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Rom 13:8). If we are determined to love, we are ready to accompany Jesus to Jerusalem and beyond, dying with him in order to rise with him.

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