

The fine print of commitment: Psalm 69:8-11, 18-20

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

by [Elizabeth D. Beck](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

When i was baptized at the age of 11, I had no idea what the risks of believing in Jesus Christ would be. As the first in my family to become a communicant member of my church, this was a big step for me. I was embarrassed that I had not been baptized as an infant, and yet there was something powerful about making a profession of faith on my own. My joy and pride at taking this momentous step were short-lived, however. When I got home I quickly got caught up in the usual family interactions. Try though I did, I could not keep "turning the other cheek." When family members pushed my buttons I was quick with old retorts.

And now they had me! I began to get messages from parents and siblings that "good Christians don't do that!" and "Jesus wouldn't want you to behave that way." In desperation, I would respond, "Who are you to say—you haven't even joined the church yet!" But the taunts hurt and frustrated, and I sought refuge in the church, my new family.

Later, as I went on to be ordained and serve in pastorates, I was faithful in teaching youth and especially confirmands the risks of faith, and the possibilities of facing ridicule or even death for their faith. I loved to cite examples of early Christian martyrs and stories from missionaries about those who suffered for their faith. I told them about a man who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. When he fell in love with the daughter of a Methodist minister and became a Christian, his family said "Shiva," mourned his "death," and never had contact with him again. Grandparents, cousins, his whole extended family, were lost to this man. That was the price he paid for becoming a Christian. That wasn't a real death, my confirmands would say. I would agree, but tell them that for that man, it felt like a death. But the youth always assumed that they would never have to face those kinds of threats, because in America we didn't live in a world where there were many non-Christians.

Early in the season of Pentecost, the church remembers the biblical texts that tell about the cost of discipleship, and the profound concept of dying and rising with Jesus Christ. Psalm 69 is a song of lament, in which the psalmist prays for deliverance from persecution and taunts—even from family members and friends. In desperation the psalmist cries, "Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies" (Ps. 69:18). Likewise, the Old Testament reading includes Jeremiah's sixth lament, in which he rails at God for "enticing" him into proclaiming God's message and then allows him to be mocked and shamed. But when Jeremiah considers not doing God's prophetic work, "then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones." When his tormentors urge Jeremiah to denounce God and look for him to stumble so they can get their revenge, the prophet proclaims, "But the Lord is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail." And the concluding hymn of praise suggests that Jeremiah has been delivered "from the hands of evildoers."

Matthew's Gospel records Jesus' guidance about the cost of discipleship just after giving the mission to the Twelve. They will be received just as Jesus has been received, and in the hindsight of the crucifixion, these words must have had even greater meaning. "Have no fear" were Jesus' words to them as they went out into a hostile world. They must speak from the housetops what he has told them in private. Those who would harm or kill them will not be able to harm their souls. And God's loving care for every sparrow that falls will be even greater for each of them. Loyalty to Jesus Christ will not go unacknowledged by God in heaven. Then, Jesus speaks of the divisiveness that commitment to him will have in families—setting parents and siblings against each other. But commitment to Jesus Christ must prevail even over family loyalties. To be worthy of Christ, one must be willing to lose one's life in order to find it. What one of us can ever be worthy?

It all goes back to our baptism, as Paul tells us in Romans 6, for if we have been baptized, we have been united in Christ in death and have been raised to newness of life in him. We who struggle with self-condemnation, as well as the taunts of persecutors—we have moved on to something greater. We can get caught up in the old life, especially when we focus on the persecutions, torments and even personal demons that assail us, but in Jesus Christ we are freed from all that. Paul exhorts us to "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus!" And we, as inheritors of the new life in Christ, are challenged daily to give up the things of this world that hold us back in order to live the resurrected life.

We fail new believers and confirmands when we don't warn them of the perils of this faith in a living Lord. Only when we take seriously those consequences of our baptism—only then—are we worthy of the One who overcame all for our sakes.