

Jesus makes it hard to be a Christian (Luke 14:25-33)

The problem many preachers face when trying to preach without fear or favor is Jesus himself.

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Jesuit priest and poet Daniel Berrigan burned draft records in 1968 in Catonsville, Maryland, to protest the war in Vietnam. He was joined by his brother Phil and seven others—the Catonsville Nine. Ordered to prison, Berrigan chose not to report. He went on the lam, calling himself “a fugitive from injustice.” His actions sent shock waves through the religious establishment by implicating the church in the antiwar movement. The Berrigan brothers made the cover of *Time*, both wearing their clerical collars, casting their action in what Bill Wylie Kellermann called “the poetics of liturgy.”

Berrigan was a thorn in the side of the Vatican, not to mention the FBI. He continued to speak in public, evading his captors at churches, convents, and college campuses, enraging J. Edgar Hoover, who put him on the FBI’s most wanted list. The merry chase continued for five months before Berrigan was arrested in Rhode Island by FBI agents posing as bird watchers.

At trial, Berrigan expanded on the poetics of liturgy.

“Our apologies, good friends,” he said in a prepared statement he read from in court, “for the fracture of good order, the burning of paper instead of children, the

angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house. We could not, so help us God, do otherwise. For we are sick at heart, our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children.”

Berrigan became a hero to activists and peaceniks across America, one of whom approached him to inquire politely about the cost of following Jesus. Dan Berrigan looked at this kid and said, “How do you look up on wood?”

Luke tells us that Jesus’ teachings are in response to the large crowds that have enthusiastically joined him and his company of disciples. He speaks to those who come to him, not to those called away from the crowd and summoned to follow. It is an important distinction. There’s a difference between volunteerism and true discipleship, making it essential for one to count the cost. Jesus’ message in this passage recapitulates an occurrence in Luke 9:57, where someone in the crowd volunteers to “follow you wherever you go.” With two parables and the repeated refrain, “whoever does not . . . cannot be my disciple,” Jesus makes plain that he has set his face toward Jerusalem, where violence, betrayal, and death await. He warns all hasty volunteers that it is not a festive parade they are joining.

I’ve often wondered how many of our church growth schemes are subverted not by Joel Osteen, who knows what he’s selling, but by Jesus himself, who calls us to be his disciples but then cautions us to be careful to count the cost when we show up for training. This can thin the ranks of the faithful as if it were Gideon’s army. I’ve often wanted to say from the pulpit, “I’m sorry that we’ve not given much thought to the consequences of following a dark-skinned Middle Eastern Jew with an attitude who has set his face to go to Jerusalem! But we were initiated into Christ’s death at our baptism, right?” The problem many preachers face when trying to preach without fear or favor is Jesus himself, who doesn’t make things easy for anyone.

As a young professor teaching intro to philosophy to freshmen, I told my students that philosophy can never make your life easier, only more difficult. The unexamined life is not worth living, said Socrates. They killed him, too.

Last time I preached this text, I used a hymn I remember singing as a boy. It posed an unanswerable question for me, one that has taken on a deeper meaning during these mean years of dogged resistance to the powers that be, to what Paul calls “spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). It’s not in most hymnals, but you can find it in some Methodist ones:

“Are ye able,” said the master,
“To be crucified with me?”
“Yea,” the sturdy dreamers answered,
“To the death we’ll follow thee.”

How do you look up on wood?