

Full Disclosure

Luke 14:25-33

Making a commitment is hard to do when you really don't know what you're getting yourself into. That's certainly true with relationships, as well as tasks, jobs, projects, responsibilities, and virtually anything in life that requires us to make a choice. It's wise and prudent to know what you're facing and to calculate the costs before you become undone by the consequences, especially if you find yourself in a position to which you are not fully committed. No one wants to be unprepared for circumstances that they could have known about or avoided, or be surprised by a situation that asks more of them than they're willing to give. In short, we want to know what we're getting ourselves into before we're willing to make a commitment.

I think that pretty much sums up the mood of our country this weekend, which is caught up in an important debate over whether the U.S. should unilaterally strike Syria to punish the Assad regime for its use of chemical weapons. In spite of the international outcry over the horrific deaths of the victims, this is not a popular cause, in large part because we really don't know what we're getting ourselves into with an attack. Ten years ago, we heard similar rhetoric from the Bush administration about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, with promises of a quick and effective campaign. Many have come to rue that decision, sensing there wasn't full disclosure on the part of the government, as it was far more complicated and deadly than we were promised with Iraqis still killing each other today. For whatever reason, President Obama has put himself out on a limb by already

declaring to the world that a military strike is warranted, even though few nations support it and Congress and the American public as a whole are rising up to oppose it. Even while you and I are here, the Sunday morning talking heads on “Meet the Press,” “Face the Nation,” and the other news programs will parse out the possible scenarios and consequences that will occur once the decision is made, one way or the other.

So much rides on the ultimate decision and action of the President and Congress this coming week—a week that’s already haunted by the shadows of 9-11. If cruise missiles strike Syria, will this do any good; what counteraction should we expect, either by Syria itself, or by its neighbors in Iran, or even Iraq, or Hezbollah in Lebanon; or what about Russia? Will Israel then respond? Will this escalate into an apocalyptic nightmare as pessimists fear?

Or, on the other hand, will President Obama and the U.S. military be forced to stand down and suffer the indignity and political equivalent of “eating crow”? What consequences will that possibly bring—of not forcefully responding to the use of weapons of mass destruction after announcing to the world that you would do so? Is this whole situation about moral principle, international law, or the hubris of power?

This is why skepticism is warranted—why questions and doubt must be raised now before anyone campaigns for a commitment.

Like our lectionary text for today states:

...[W]hat king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able...?

Doubts raised may be the prophetic voices within and outside of us we need to listen to in order to be certain we will fulfill the commitments we make.

I'm not just referring to the politics and prospects for war. When you think about it, this larger-than-life moral conundrum facing our nation is not any more perplexing to human emotion or spirit than other crises, even on a personal level where, for instance, a cancer patient has to choose a course of treatment not knowing the effects or outcome, or a jury has to determine the guilt or innocence of a defendant, or a marriage partner contemplates filing for divorce, or when a gay child worries about living with the consequences of coming out to family and friends. Every decision, each commitment we make in life has room for question and doubt. Human beings make decisions all the time that are not clear cut and bear sobering consequences they may come to regret.

Doubts don't disappear even when a decision has been made or a choice made known. In fact, that's when questions and doubt serve an important role in maintaining a commitment, as long as they are addressed effectively and appropriately. Rollo May, the late existential psychologist, wrote about the place of doubt in relation to commitments we make:

The relationship between commitment and doubt is by no means an antagonistic one. Commitment is healthiest when it is not *without* doubt but *in spite of* doubt. To believe fully and at the same moment to have doubts is not at all a contradiction: it presupposes a greater respect for truth, an awareness that truth always goes beyond anything that can be said or done at any given moment. To every thesis there is an antithesis, and to this there is a synthesis. ¹

¹ Rollo May, *The Courage to Create*, Norton, 1975, pg. 21.

This makes sense: when we don't know how things will play out, doubts keep us on the path of searching for a better result. A decision, of course, is only a first step; ongoing questions and doubt create the synthesis—they help shape and influence the actions we take so that commitment to our objectives can be maintained and fulfilled over time. Or to put it another way, the difference between doubts one may have before and after a decision is made is that prior doubts help to *inform* the decision-making process; questions and doubt after a commitment is made serve to *identify* areas that must be addressed, where plans may need to be revised, and where resolve and integrity have to be strengthened. So doubts and skepticism aren't a sign of disloyalty—in fact, quite the opposite. Engaging doubt helps make our commitments in life meaningful, worthwhile, and sustainable and not just superficial, half-hearted, and easily abandoned. This holds true in relationships, tasks, and whatever cause or purpose we should ever embrace.

Honestly, as a pastor and preacher, I often think about this, i.e., the questions and doubts you and I need to express and examine when it comes to our life causes and purposes, particularly our religious faith. I say that because I think many believe that raising doubt is a sign or form of disloyalty, while others simply let their skepticism lead them to a growing disinterest or disengagement from their faith. As I see it, this is not what our questions and doubt should lead to. Why I often preach on provocative topics or offer perspectives that raise questions about some of our traditional beliefs or practices is not because I'm betraying their intent. Rather, it's to stimulate our thinking by engaging the questions that already exist—

those that challenge our beliefs and need to be addressed. Again, doubts raised may be the prophetic voices within and outside of us we need to listen to in order to be certain we will fulfill the commitments we make.

I'm certainly not alone. In listening to our Gospel text for this morning, every one of you should have questions about it, since it messes with our conventional loyalties in life:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Honestly, this sounds like something you'd expect from Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church than from the collected sayings of Jesus! You can't just sit there in a pew and accept it without questioning the text, the logic, and the spiritual implications because it's not the sort of claim that you'd embrace as God's word for your life!

In fact, a statement like this runs exactly counter to what many of us believe intrinsically. Why are we Christian? Isn't it because we believe it weaves together our core needs and values related to God, country, community, and family—the four loyalties most important to people in life? That's why it's not hard to make a commitment to follow Jesus and be baptized, because it fits in so well with conventional life and thinking—do good, be good, and have a good life. That's as American as apple pie! How, then, can “hating” your family be a Gospel teaching? Who can believe this is a word of God?

Most people (including preachers) handle their doubts over this by avoiding this verse or ignoring it. Yet, a saying like this is designed to rile us, and more importantly, to unmask some of the core

assumptions we make about faith and to challenge our sense of commitment. You see, as a single verse, it makes no sense. But when put into the context of competing loyalties, it does. It makes sense when viewed as a moral and spiritual commitment that lasts—one that will invariably require us to make choices in life that will not be popularly supported and may put us at odds with even those closest to us.

Yes, Jesus was using hyperbolic language here to stress the importance of what each disciple, each follower, should consider before making the commitment to follow him and his teachings. Following his ways isn't as easy as eating apple pie! We have to struggle with it—wrestle with all of the implications and potential complications and difficult choices that are to be made. I assume Jesus intended to make people uncomfortable with his demands; he didn't mince words or hide the moral and value-based conflicts that invariably arise whenever we fully commit to his message and instructions. Nothing was hidden in fine print or deceptively avoided just to appeal to conventional moral and religious sensibilities.

No, for the sake of appreciating what the commitment to following him entails, what the consequences will be, this is full disclosure: there are times when being a committed follower will lead us to places and loyalties that will rival even the most significant ones we will ever have in life, i.e., familial, relational, cultural, national, political, intellectual, spiritual—whatever will claim our highest allegiance in life must be put in its place, secondary to the faithfulness to which we will commit to him. It's an easy choice only when you don't fully grasp what you're getting yourself into!

Not everyone will be able to make such a commitment, but it's better to know what you're getting into upfront, then to have to discover it and abandon the faith. Not everyone will be able to love their enemies and not retaliate, but instead do good to those who harm them, especially when their enemies do things deserving of being hated! Not everyone will be able to show mercy to those undeserving of it. Not everyone will be willing to ask forgiveness or to forgive someone else when they are perfectly justified in their bitterness and resentment. Not everyone will be willing to forswear violence in violent situations, or show hospitality to strangers, or visit those in prison, or go out of their way to be generous with everything they possess, or put the needs of others before their own families, or show compassion toward broken people, or not pass judgment on those they dislike or fear. Their loyalty to family, to country, or to other things will supersede their loyalty to Jesus.

If a person doesn't want to follow Jesus' ways, then he or she shouldn't sign up for the commitment. The commandments and teachings of Jesus are full disclosure of what discipleship means, and they didn't fit very well into the conventions of his time, nor do they fit very well into ours. They should raise questions and doubts about what it means to be a person of faith! Frankly, every committed disciple since the beginning days of the primitive church has struggled with what it takes to be like Jesus, because it involves a constant unraveling and unraveling of one's life and priorities.

As I said at the beginning, it's hard to make a commitment without knowing what you're getting yourself into. Like so many moral conundrums in life, making a commitment to follow Jesus is

laced with questions and doubts—full disclosure that there’s a cost to discipleship we have to take into consideration before we jump onboard with it. If you’re still considering it, wrestle through those doubts before you decide. If you’ve already committed your life to following his ways, then let your questions and doubts, or those others have about you and your faith, guide you to help you evaluate your true loyalties so the commitment you make has integrity as a search for truth.

For the choices we make and the actions we take serve as our full disclosure—of who we truly are and what we ultimately value. That’s something, as followers of Christ, we should never have to abandon or regret.

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