

One night a man was driving on a lonely Texas road when his engine sputtered to a stop. He popped the hood and stood staring at the engine. Suddenly he heard a voice say, "It's your fuel pump." "Who said that" he demanded. There were 2 horses standing in the fenced field alongside the road. "It's your fuel pump," one horse said. "Tap it with your flashlight, and try it again."

He tapped the fuel pump with his flashlight, turned the key, and, sure enough, the engine roared to life. At the next town he found an open service station, where, still dumbfounded, the man told the whole story to the mechanic. "A horse, you say? Was it by any chance a white horse?" he asked. The man said, "Yes, it was! Am I crazy?"

"No, you ain't crazy. In fact, you're lucky," said the mechanic, "because that black horse don't know beans about cars."

First a little background on this very challenging gospel text. Remember that Luke's gospel is constructed around 10 meals, and Jesus had just been at a meal, and now has continued His journey. He begins to describe in more detail what discipleship requires. He teaches that those who follow Him must count the cost of discipleship – and then make discipleship their life's first priority. The choice to follow after Jesus cannot be made casually. We must first assess the risks, then fully pursue the task, and finally complete the goal.

Jesus must hold the disciple's allegiance over all else, including family. This would have been a jolt to His listeners – because your very identity depended on your connection to your family. The call to 'hate' family members and even one's own life must not be read literally, but as a form of hyperbole. As deeply as we might love a parent or sibling, a spouse or child, we must love Jesus even more. Likewise, Jesus' call to give up all our possessions is exaggerated rhetoric, but material possessions can be a great hindrance to discipleship. Witness how our tithing generally declines as we make more money. The poor give more as a percent of income than the rich. What's that all about? Jesus is telling us that no earthly attachment – to family or possessions or money – can deter our pursuit of God's kingdom. Jesus must be the focus, the passion, and the goal of all who seek Him. Discipleship is a relationship with Jesus and a commitment to Him. It means carrying the cross and following Him. Following Jesus means suffering with Him, bearing the pain of persecution, and sharing the fate of rejection by the world.

The decision for discipleship requires that we first assess the costs. As when considering whether or not to build a watchtower or go into battle, we must assess our resources. We must not begin a building project until we know that it can be completed. A king does not go into battle until he knows he has the forces to be victorious. Likewise with discipleship: Jesus says that we must assess whether we are ready to take on the personal commitment and sacrifice required to follow Jesus. Being Christian is not a free ride. (adapted from Steve Binz, JESUS, THE COMPASSIONATE SAVIOR, Luke (12-24), p. 39)

And from that little bit of background, I glean three points. First, that we must prioritize if we are to follow Christ. If we want to play basketball, or play an instrument or exceed academically, we have to make something our first priority. The problem is that we are mostly raised in America to succeed, not to be holy. To amass money, not to care about the poor. To accumulate things, not to follow the path of simplicity of Christ. But as Kenneth Pillar says, "If we find God, we find life; if we miss God, we miss the whole point of living." A lot of people in our country – even devout church-goers -- have unfortunately missed the whole

point of living. Many have never discovered that life is about God, and then life becomes about what we want, buy, drive, enjoy, eat, drink, travel, etc. Pretty shallow in the shadow of eternity.

I know we all have our own concept of what is important in life. There's a tombstone in Wisconsin that leaves no doubt about the priority of the person who lies in that particular grave. Under a certain man's name and the dates of his birth and death is carved this inscription: "Bowled 300 in 1982." Egad!

A woman was taking her time browsing through a yard sale. She said to the homeowner, "My husband is going to be very angry when he finds out I stopped at your yard sale." The homeowner sought to reassure her: "I'm sure he'll understand when you tell him about all the bargains you found," she replied. "Normally, yes," the woman said. "But he just broke his leg, and he's waiting for me to take him to the emergency room to have it set." I don't think her priority was her husband!

A teenager named Buck was walking home one day when he suddenly realized that 2 men were flanking him. "Give us your wallet," one of the men insisted. "I have a gun. Give us your wallet or I'll shoot."

"No," Buck said.

"Hey, man," said the man holding the gun, "you don't understand. We're robbing you. Give us your wallet."

"No," Buck said again.

"Give us your wallet, or I'll knife you," said the other hold-up man. By now the robbers were pleading more than they were demanding.

"No," Buck said once again. He kept walking, and a few steps later, he realized that the 2 men had disappeared. As he related this story to a friend later, the friend asked, "Weren't you scared?" Buck replied, "Of course I was scared!"

"Then why didn't you give them your wallet?" asked his friend.

"Because," Buck answered matter-of-factly, "My learners permit is in it." Everyone has their own concept of what is important in life. (DYNAMIC PREACHING, Oct-Dec 2015, p. 60)

Dorothy Day had her priorities straight. Once when she was being interviewed by a young reporter at a Catholic Worker House, it seemed that every few minutes into the interview the doorbell would ring. Dorothy would politely excuse herself and give a sandwich or a pair of gloves or a subway token to the street person at the door. After a number of such interruptions, the reporter became frustrated and wondered out loud why it didn't seem to bother Dorothy. She was as calm and serene as ever. Dorothy smiled at him and told him that every time the doorbell rang it was an opportunity for her to serve Christ, and what could be more important than that? (PREPARE THE WORD, 18 July 2004, p. 4)

Second, our discipleship, our response to Christ. As I have said a number of times, our vocation will be something we are equipped to do – and that we are good at – and enjoy. So we need to ask ourselves some questions in order to figure out how to live our discipleship. ***What is my deepest dream? ***How much passion do I experience in my daily life? ***What do I want my epitaph to say? (I hope not that you bowled 300 or got a hole-in-one!) ***How much am I growing these days? ***How often do I take risks that require a power greater than my own? ***If I had to name the 'one true thing' that I believe I was set on this earth to do, what would it be? ***How clear is it to me?

What has the Lord of all gifts given to us that we need to invest in the kingdom? Maybe it's our mind. Our mind can be a place of unrealized potential, saturated with whatever is on billboards or in the mass media. We can fill it with junk, jealousy, greed, anger, or fear. Or it can be filled with thoughts that are good, noble, true, and courageous. But we will have to invest it. Maybe it's our material possessions. Our bank account can be a place of unrealized potential. We can use money to accumulate stuff and pamper ourselves. Or our money can build a church, spread the gospel, feed the poor, educate a child, or help a refugee.

John Wesley wrote that we Christians have just 3 rules to follow regarding material possessions: Make all you can – save all you can – give all you can. It seems like a lot of American Catholics have decided that 2 out of 3 ain't bad. (adapted from John Ortberg, IF YOU WANT TO WALK ON WATER, YOU'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF THE BOAT, p. 50-51)

And finally, picking up the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born to a patrician German family. He had always had everything given to him on a silver spoon – a loving, affluent family, superior educational advantages, good looks, good sense. Yet Bonhoeffer, unlike most of his fellow German Christians, knew when it was time for him to lay aside all that and take the narrow way of the cross. He eventually was hanged by the Nazis. Earlier he had written, "The cross is laid on every Christian....When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." (THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP). Bonhoeffer's life illustrates that Christians don't go out looking for a cross to bear. If we're faithful, the world will offer us one, sooner or later. As Christians are in the business of following Jesus; the world is in the business of crucifixion. Or, as the Jesuit Daniel Berrigan once said, 'If you want to follow Jesus, you had better look good on wood.' (William Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2015, p. 48)

There's a line from the illuminator of the ST. JOHN'S BIBLE that states: "We have to love our way out of this." There's nothing wimpy or namby-pamby or blind about this conviction. When we love extravagantly, we are not purposely blinding ourselves to moral realities – just the contrary. Love is not a sentiment but "a harsh and dreadful thing," as Dostoevsky said.

This is what Jesus shows on His terrible cross. And this is just what we, His followers, must imitate. Taking up the cross means not just being willing to suffer, but being willing to suffer AS HE DID, absorbing violence and hatred through our forgiveness and nonviolence. It means that our life is ultimately and completely about love. (Barron, LENTEN GOSPEL REFLECTIONS, WORD ON FIRE 2019, p 7)

A story to conclude. There is a tale about a colony of monkeys that lived in the Himalayas. The tribe was ruled by a monkey king, who was not only strong and powerful, but wise and compassionate.

In the valley where the monkeys lived stood a beautiful mango tree on which grew the sweetest and largest fruit. The monkey king's greatest fear was that the bounty of the mango tree would be discovered by the humans living in the region below the mountain and they would come to take the tree and drive his tribe from their home – or worse. The monkeys went to great lengths to keep the secret.

But one day, as the monkeys were gathering mangoes, a flower from the tree fell into the river that flowed down the mountain into the city. A fisherman caught the strange flower in his net and brought it to the palace of King Brahmadata, a self-indulgent, imperious ruler who believed his subjects existed to serve him. Brahmadata ordered an expedition to find the source of the flower. The expedition followed the river up the mountain and found the tree; they managed to fend off the monkeys long enough to bring back some of the fruit. The king had never tasted such delicious mangoes before and ordered his archers to seize the valley and destroy the monkeys.

When the archers were but a few hours away, the monkeys saw them and scurried to warn the monkey king. The monkey king immediately went to work.

The monkey king cut a strong rope of vine and tied it to the trunk of the mango tree. He tied the other end to his ankle and then made the great long leap from the mango tree to a tree on the other side of the river, grabbing a branch with his long, strong arms. His plan was to tie the vine rope to the tree to make a bridge for the monkeys to cross for safety. But the vine was too short. So, as he hung there with the vine rope tied to his ankle, the monkey king called the monkeys to make their way across the river. For hours, the monkey king hung there as the monkeys raced across the vine and over his strong back to safety. As the last of the monkeys crossed, the monkey king's body finally gave out and he fell to the ground, broken in pain.

King Brahmadata watched the escape. He could not believe what he was seeing; the incredible sacrifice of the monkey king for his tribe. Brahmadata ordered his men to carefully lift the monkey king from the ground and make him as comfortable as possible in the king's own tent.

"You have given your life and all your strength to save your people," Brahmadata said humbly. "I had to do whatever I could to save them," the dying monkey king said. "Because I could save them, I have no fear of death. My joy is that they are safe. Now I can rest peacefully. But understand this truth, Sire: It is love, not power, that makes a person great. If you wish to be great, you must serve, not be served. AMEN. (adapted from CONNECTIONS, February 28, 2021)