

One of the most memorable sights our family saw on our vacation last Summer occurred at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery in Washington D.C. It is a solemn duty freely undertaken by members of the Third United States Infantry (The Tomb Guards) to guard this Tomb. Rain or shine or snow, day or night, full of tourists or deserted—since July 1, 1937 the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier has been patrolled without interruption.

The discipline freely chosen by those guards is remarkable. Guards work on a team rotation: 24 hours on, 24 hours off for three days, then four days off. While serving, they serve either half-hour (during daylight hours of the spring and summer months), or one hour (all other) shifts.

Each guard paces in perfect precision 21 steps (echoing the 21-gun salute, the highest honor the Military gives to a military or foreign dignitary) past the Memorials to the unknown soldiers from World War I and II, the Korean War, and the now vacant crypt honoring those slain in Vietnam, pauses 21 seconds while facing the Tomb, shifts his weapon to the opposite shoulder away from the Tomb (signifying his willingness to defend the Unknown Soldiers from any and all harm) and paces back again the 21 steps. He continues this ritual until his replacement comes, when an elaborate and equally solemn ritual to exchange sentries ensues.

Each guard wears a uniform of wool in all seasons. His uniform is impeccable as his marching. It takes from five to eight hours for each guard to prepare his uniform each day; every day he must shave twice and get his hair cut once. In order to be considered for this duty he must pass a rigorous marching examination and memorize, verbatim, seven pages of Cemetery history (and know where each of almost 300 dignified veterans are buried). To be considered for the special Tomb Guard medal—after a minimum of 9 months of honorable service, requiring daily marching drills and physical training, he must score over 95% (verbatim from memory) when tested on any 100 of 300 questions. Since 1937 about 525 soldiers have earned this medal. (I couldn't find out whether women soldiers yet serve in this capacity.)

This exacting, high duty for which soldiers still volunteer strikes the modern, secular ears of some as an archaic exercise. Part of the cultural battle playing out around us so fiercely features two competing worldviews. (I believe the future of our nation hangs in the balance.)

The traditional view of life with which many of us older adults were raised views life as a lifelong process of struggling to master our impulses, to discipline our appetites, to overcome our tendencies to self-indulgence. The cultivation of character was recognized as paramount. Our educational system was built on the premise that learning to be productive, responsible members of society involves the progressive training to be able do many things that run counter to our impulses and desires. This was the goal.

The view of life fast replacing it holds the opposite: life has become (as one social critic has written) “the godless, gregarious pursuit of a good time. ‘Fun’ morality replaces ‘goodness’ morality which stresses interference with impulses. Not having fun is now an occasion for self-examination: What is wrong with me? Whereas gratification

of forbidden impulses traditionally aroused guilt, failure to have fun now lowers self-esteem.” (A large level of self-satisfaction is earned thru self-mastery. Genuine “self-esteem” is also gained thru genuine accomplishment and self-control; what is touted in classrooms today as “self-esteem” is a counterfeit.) This battle is fought not only in the classroom but within most every human body and mind. It starts early, when the toddler gets his hands on his brother’s new toy under the Christmas tree and tearfully feels it wrested away.

It’s no surprise to any of you on which side of this cultural divide Jesus and His faithful Church stand. For Paul and the other writers of the New Testament, life was portrayed not as a day at the beach or a night at the club but as a lifelong battle, as an unending marathon. A race to life’s end.

We heard Jesus Himself define how His disciples behave. (You and I, His disciples, His Church, do not need to hear the latest TV pundits or read the latest poll or the professor of Ethics at Princeton to tell us how to live our lives. The Word from God has spoken. He tells us His disciples must be willing to walk away from our closest human relationships—no questions asked—and prefer to live as His disciple. (Of course this does not mean Jesus is not concerned about our marriages, our families—on the contrary, these are the highest and most noble of our obligations on earth. This is why he chooses these examples. But still: they are not ultimate.)

His disciples prefer duty and discipline, submission and service to Him over “life itself.” [v 27] Over having our own way, our own ways; over hanging onto our old human nature. His disciples are willing to give up all our possessions, everything we own or hold dear. [At least we don’t have to spend 8 hours a day laundering and pressing our uniform.]

We live in a secular society, a consumerist society. These challenges from our Lord do not fall gently into our ears—if so, we are probably not hearing correctly. Do you recoil from hearing these standards of Jesus, do you scan quickly to look for loopholes, perhaps dismiss them as “just church stuff, scare material, patently crazy and impractical exaggeration, which have nothing to do with real life”? (Haven’t we all entertained these responses at times?)

Do you pay Jesus the high compliment, when you hear His demands, of wondering whether He might be crazy? Deluded? Hopelessly out of touch with the common person, holding on to ridiculously unattainable standards?

Until you get to know Him, I admit, He sounds plumb crazy. Either He’s crazy or each of us is crazy, or used to be crazy, anyway. (There’s not much middle ground: “to become My disciple you must be willing to die, willing to give up everything most worthwhile in this world.”)

The other conclusion, of course, is that Jesus is the wisest and most intelligent Man who ever lived. He is the Master of Reality, and He knows us far better than we have yet been willing to risk knowing ourselves. He expects something of us which is so much higher than we ourselves expect, we conclude He’s crazy.

Maybe if we lived in other lands, hunted down and tortured for our faith; maybe if we had nothing going for us in this lifetime, no prospects, it would be easier to hear this call of Jesus. It’s sadly ironic that the more we have received, the more “successful” we

become, the more economically viable, the less interested we tend to become in giving our lives to become His disciples.

Jesus doesn't zap us when we're lukewarm, when we try not so much to obey as to take advantage of His Spirit—His Holy Spirit patiently mourns as we continue to bear the cost of such misunderstanding. Some folks dabble in relationship to God for decades, “just kidding around,” and then wonder why other folks get so excited about “church,” why God doesn't answer their prayers. It is they who lose out.

If we are not His disciples, we deny God the possibility of deploying us as His agents of reconciliation, of His love, His hope. The purpose of our disciplines, after all, is transformed persons in service to Him.

If we are not His disciples, following His principles and obeying His Spirit, we ourselves keep making foolish choices in romantic relationships, thinking His rules do not apply to us, and we keep getting our hearts broken and our lives upended. If we are not His disciples, we make foolish choices with our money—saving too little or spending too much on the things which won't really help us in the long run. If we are not His disciples, we will likely remain shallow people always looking outside ourselves for the next excitement—growing more and more unsatisfied inside even as we spend more and more to keep up this unwinnable quest. If we are not His disciples, we ourselves keep making foolish choices in our diet and lifestyle and personal habits and physical health, and we pay the cost. (I've got to come clean with you on this one. I've been telling my physician Greg Pecchia I'm doing pretty well at cutting down my refined sugar intake, which is generally true (generally)...and then on the Patio after our Pentecost Worship Service I walked right into him as I was carrying a slice of red silk cake in one hand and a Mary Mussleman cookie in the other...Greg was too gracious to say anything, but I knew I was “busted”!)

(One point about becoming disciples may be confusing for us Protestants to understand at first. You may be wondering why, if God loves us as much as Jesus has shown He does, and His mercy comes to us freely, and we are “saved by grace thru faith, and that not of ourselves lest any of us should boast...” then why should we need to struggle so hard, so long, to live in this love God has toward us? Is God's love freely given, or do we have to become spiritual Green Berets, elite Hall of Famers, to become Christ's disciples?

The point is that grace is opposed to *deserving*—not to *effort*. Yes, God loves you so much that nothing you can ever do can make Him love you more; nothing you can ever do can make Him love you less. You and I are stuck with God's unwavering love, forever and ever, whatever we do. We can never deserve God's love. However if I choose to ignore His love, to live according to my own ease and outlook and efforts—to live untransformed, unrepentant, unconverted—then I can probably manage, with enough obstinacy on my part, to avoid benefiting from the life-changing effects of His divine love for me. I suppose I could choose to remain living in hell.

For this reason—because God loves us so tenaciously—Paul encourages his hearers to keep on racing to win the prize; keep on training, keep on struggling. Paul above all others knew he never deserved the love of God in Christ; he also knew that he could squander the benefits if he got lazy and undisciplined. He could not fight to gain God's grace. It was *because of* God's grace that Paul knew it was worth the cost to live his life under severe discipline. To leave behind everything within him exposed as

unworthy by the blinding love of God; to strive with the Holy Spirit of holiness to bear the fruits of love, joy, peace, self-control...experiencing the love of God is precisely what moved Paul to struggle to allow the Spirit of God to make him into a totally new creation, a superbly effective ambassador of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We contemporary Americans do not automatically understand what it is to be disciples, or to be disciplined to a master. Many brave soldiers, women and men in uniform, understand what it is to submit to authority to become disciplined, to give up their freedoms and maybe their lives for a greater good.

For better and worse, many Muslims understand discipline. Every year hundreds of thousands of Muslims around the world willingly place their young boys in a madrassa or religious elementary school, where after three years they have learned to recite the entire Quran. (Every time I see a Muslim woman wearing a headcover in public I privately commend her observing what she has been taught: she is willing to embrace this discipline; she is willing to “go public” in her devotion to Allah. I also privately lament that her religion requires her, to one degree or other, to remain anonymous and inferior to the men around her, to believe herself to be something of a non-person, to deny her the dignity and freedom of a precious child of God. But she didn’t ask me...)

Many in India understand what it is to be disciplined to a master. Maybe you have heard of the adept, the student, who went to ask a guru if he could become a disciple of the guru. The guru told him “no.” Again later the adept approached the guru and asked if he could become his disciple. The guru again said “no.” A third time the adept went to the guru. This time the guru took him down to the Ganges River. They waded out and then without warning the guru backflipped the young man and held his head under the water. And held his head under the water. And held his head under the water...Finally, when the man feared he would drown, had seen his life flash before him, the guru let him up for air. With a great desperate gasp and heaving lungs the man breathed in the fresh air. “When you are as eager to become my disciple as you were just now eager to breathe, then I will accept you.”

Jesus doesn’t hold our heads under water, but apparently He has something like this Baptism in mind. When we get serious with Him then He can do something with us! “Unless you are born anew, you cannot enter the Kingdom of God...” “Whoever will lose her life for My sake will surely find it; whoever keeps clinging onto it will surely lose it...” “But Jesus, wait a little bit...I just bought some land, and need to appraise it; I just got married, and need to get accustomed to married land; I just bought a new team of oxen, I need to break them in...” “Go ahead—but don’t think you are My disciples at that rate. Go ahead and choose...”

In His mercy, Jesus gives us a lifetime to keep choosing. He defines our discipleship to Him as a lifelong process. You all know getting off to a fervent start, having a wonderful emotional experience at a Church Camp when we were in High School doesn’t count for anything with Him if we peter out somewhere along the way and finish out of the money. He tells us plainly we are to count the cost of discipleship beforehand lest we quit before we die and “not be able to finish”—and appear ridiculous. “The one who once puts his hand to the plow and turns back is not worthy to be My disciple.”

I ask again: does this sort of talk from Jesus sound harsh, unrealistic? Does it not sound plain offensive? (If you're offended, you are in broad company. You "get" it!) How many people heard Jesus Himself explain the Kingdom, explain about discipleship—and how many walked away from Him! Almost all of them. His explaining the finer points of discipleship, among other things, got Jesus nailed to the cross. That didn't happen because He said nice religious mush.

But our taking offense is not the last or most important response. Jesus asks everything *from* us, and from now on, because He wants to entrust everything *to* us—from now on. I cannot buy the Pearl of Great Price if I refuse to give up the pennies I think are so valuable. Jesus never asks us to pay any cost without offering us infinitely greater rewards. We never need to "play the martyr" with Jesus. (Remember Peter: "Look, Lord we have left our homes and followed you.' What's in it for us? And Jesus said to them, 'Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.')" [Lk 18:28-30]

Our problem is that I get so attached to my pennies—my habits, my leisure, my independence, my fears, my ambitions, my "not getting involved," my own notions as to the future I want—I get fearful and disobedient about opening my eyes and ears and heart to hear Jesus when He talks about real treasure, eternal treasure.

Isn't this what it comes down to? We know Jesus is right—but we like what we like in this world a little too much to let go, at least all at once, and let Him have more of us—all of us. What God wants is *all* of us.

(Only the wounds I submit to God can be redeemed; only the will I offer to Him can be re-directed into His will; nothing I keep to myself can come with me into eternity; only what dies within me will be raised with Him into eternal life.)

You in this church well know: being a disciple requires discipline. Throughout the upcoming Sundays this summer I will preach thru the spiritual disciplines we emphasize. (It has been over five years) The point of our disciplines is not to impress God. Not to win God's favor. The point of our disciplines is not to become stronger super-Christians, beefing up the "religious" part of our lives while the rest remains untouched. We do not practice these disciplines in order to get more of the things we want out of life.

No. Disciples of Jesus recognize that all our lives belong to Him. He will change us until we hunger desperately for Him, until we want what He wants for us, what He created us for. Taking up our spiritual disciplines, fighting the good fight, running the marathon with Paul and the saints before us—however imperfectly—allows God to transform us more quickly, more entirely. Disciples of Jesus live fearlessly, unafraid of death. Unafraid of consequences, once His Spirit has directed us. We live in the love and power of His Spirit. We make decisions more wisely. His disciples have more energy and focus for what's important, more time for those things which ultimately satisfy us. More power to overcome those things holding us back. Many of you know all this: you are living this way!

It works something like this, like the adventure of an acquaintance of a dear family friend on the East Coast, who earned an Olympic medal in the 1950's. He was minding his own business, striding across campus to register for his classes at an Ivy League college on the first day of his freshman year. The college coach for crew was a

very resourceful and knowledgeable coach. He noticed the physique of this incoming freshman (tallish, lean, broad shoulders) and approached him. He looked him square in the eye and introduced himself. "If you would be willing to come out for the crew team, and if you will obey me, and do what I tell you to do, I promise you I will make you into one of the finest rowers in the world." A few days later the young man, having checked up on the coach and found himself willing to trust him, agreed to join the crew team. Indeed he did enjoy an Olympic experience and earn a medal.

The coach was that good.

Jesus is calling you. "If you will obey Me, and do what My Holy Spirit tells you to do, I promise I will make you into the person God longs for you to be."

Offer yourself to Him, all over again.

Jesus is that good.

### **Luke 14:25-33**

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and He turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be My disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

So therefore, none of you can become My disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.