

by Bill Moore

Open a bible at the center of your group. Place a lighted candle nearby. As a prayer, slowly take turns speaking the first names of people who have traveled with you on your life journey. Write their names on small pieces of paper, and place them around the bible.

Nearly every Sunday afternoon when I was young, my dad and mom took our family on a drive. On one summer Sunday, we stopped at a small playground. While my younger brothers and sisters played on the swings and teeter-totter, I started to scale the monkey bars. My father came over and pointed out the great distance between the ladder's top rung and the first horizontal bar. I said I was sure I could reach the bar. He agreed, but cautioned that it might be harder to get down than to climb up.

I went ahead, jumped for the bar, grabbed it, and leveraged myself with legs and arms to the top of the steel structure. It was high. I waved to the "little kids" below, certain that they admired big brother's accomplishment.

Then I wanted to get down. I lowered myself, hanging by my hands from the end bar. But, when I swung my feet to

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the ladder, they didn't reach its top rung.

The ground was far below; I was afraid to let go and drop. My arms ached, so with my last ounce of strength, I managed to climb back on top. After resting, I tried to get down again without success.

Then my dad announced it was time to go. My brothers and sisters headed toward the car with my mom. I called to my father, "I can't get down." He came over and said he had warned me that might be a problem, but I went ahead and climbed up anyway. I'd have to get down by myself.

I started to whimper, but let myself down by my arms again and tried to swing and stretch to

reach the ladder. "See, I can't," I said.

"Then drop," my father said.

"It's too far," I sobbed, "I'll hurt myself."

"Well, you got up there," my father insisted, "so you'll just have to get yourself down."

I pulled myself back up to the top and began to cry and shout, "You've got to help me!"

My father said, "We will wait for you in the car."

After a few minutes sitting atop the monkey bars crying, I lowered myself, let go of the bar, dropped to the ground, and shambled, embarrassed and angry, to the car.

Out of respect for my dear departed father, I must acknowledge that, when I asked him about this incident in later years, he said he didn't remember it. But, whether accurate or embellished, the memory comes to mind when I read Sunday's gospel. There Jesus cautions his followers that being his disciple will be much harder than they think.

● **Share an experience that challenged you beyond anything you imagined.**



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GOSPEL

What is the cost of discipleship?

NARRATOR: Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. He turned to them.

JESUS 1: Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my follower. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

JESUS 2: For which of you, intending to build a tower, does

not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete the project? Otherwise when you lay the foundation and are not able to complete the work, all who see it will ridicule the builders.

ONLOOKERS: Look who began to build but could not finish.

JESUS 1: Or what king going to wage war with another king will not sit down first and consider whether with ten thousand he

can withstand an enemy coming against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, he will send a delegation while the enemy is still at a distance, asking for terms of peace.

JESUS 2: In the same way, none of you can be my disciple if you do not renounce all your possessions.

Luke 14.25-33



Jesus calls us to take up the cross and renounce our possessions.

Luke is the travel writer of the New Testament. Both his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles are journey narratives. In Luke 9.51, Jesus begins making his way to Jerusalem, where he will suffer, die, be raised, and ascend. In Sunday's gospel he is in the middle of this journey, which extends until Luke 19.

Along the way, Jesus proclaims glad tidings to the poor, takes the side of the oppressed, and brings compassion and healing to the afflicted. He also teaches and prepares his chosen disciples to continue this work after he leaves them.

The sayings in Sunday's gospel are part of that teaching. They make the point that following Jesus is a serious commitment, more important than family ties. Following Jesus entails painful suffering—even death—and requires

renunciation of all possessions. Failure to understand and prepare for the rigors of the journey can lead to disastrous consequences.

Jesus' teaching seems harsh and frightening, particularly the words about hating family and carrying a cross. Understanding that exaggeration and paradox are figures of speech diminishes the harshness somewhat. But to carry the cross was not, as it has become, a familiar metaphor for enduring suffering.

Crucifixion was an excruciatingly painful and shameful form of execution, reserved for Rome's vilest criminals and insurrectionists, cruelly calculated to deter imitators. Jesus' statement, "Whoever does not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple," would have shocked and rocked his listeners.

But that was his intent. Jesus is teaching crowds. He uses strong and shocking language to shake people out of the false certainty of popular messianic expectations. Like a coach trying to bring cocky players down to earth before a game with an underrated opponent, like a union leader trying to remind angry workers how long a strike can be, Jesus talks tough and straight from the shoulder. "Friends, we're not on the way to a Sunday school picnic."

Sunday's gospel is meant to sober us up, to remind us that, though we are invited to the joyful and wonderful messianic feast, the road there is not an easy one.

● **What popular ideas of who Jesus is and what he stands for do you see as misconceptions?**

● In what ways have you carried Jesus' cross?

The conditions Jesus lays down for discipleship are unambiguous. First of all, we must “hate” parents, spouse, children, and even our own life. In other words, we must love him more than our loved ones or ourselves. This is a way of stating the two great commandments—to love God with all our heart, all our being, all our strength, and all our mind, and love our neighbors as ourselves.

Jesus' sayings also make clear that discipleship is more than a private matter. The God of Jesus is not a household god. Faith in God is more than a family tradition or personal belief. Following Jesus takes us into the world, away from home, even away from ourselves, into relationships with people not like us. “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it,” says Jesus in Luke 8.21.

Jesus' life and work were scandalous, and disciples who try to live and do as he did can expect to endure shaming, harassment, and even violence, as he did. That is the meaning of the requirement to carry the cross.

Proclaiming the good news of God's abundant loving kindness toward all people contradicts conventional wisdom that there is not enough love or anything else to go around, so it must be reserved for our own kind. Taking the side of the poor and oppressed incurs the wrath

of wealthy, powerful oppressors. Healing the sick free of charge, no matter who they are or where they live or how they got that way, brings condemnation from those who despise the afflicted or aim to profit from their misery.

● What is scarce in your life? What is abundant?

● If as St. Ambrose said, “the world is given to all, and not only to the rich,” how can we organize the economy to make sure that everyone has enough resources for a decent life?

Finally, Jesus demands that his followers have the necessary resources. Like a builder who, before starting a tower, makes sure he has enough money to complete it; like a king marching into battle who makes sure he has enough troops to win, so Jesus' disciples must make sure they have the wherewithal to follow him.

But in his best paradoxical fashion, Jesus insists, “Less is more.” We ready ourselves for building by renouncing our possessions.

Possessions, however many, are not enough. They are not the “right stuff.” Only nothing is enough. One who wishes to be a disciple gets enough by giving away.

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Read Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': Care for Our Common Home*. Search online by title. Reflect on his challenge to integrate care for our planet and for people who are poor.

“Whether believers or not, we are agreed today that the earth is essentially a shared inheritance, whose fruits are meant to benefit everyone. For believers, this becomes a question of fidelity to the Creator, since God created the world for everyone. Hence every ecological approach needs to incorporate a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and underprivileged. The principle of the subordination of private property to the universal destination of goods, and the right of everyone to their use, is a golden rule of social conduct and ‘the first principle of the whole ethical and social order’” (#93).



This generous economics of discipleship turns accepted economic theories on their heads. It is God's economy of abundance, not the prevalent economy of scarcity, profit, and market share. It is the economics of the great feast,

where the host insists on filling the house and lavishing generosity on friends and strangers alike. And even after his servants have scoured the alleys of the town for the poor and crippled, the blind and the lame, there was still plenty of room. Sharing spreads and multiplies wealth.

Jesus aims to shake the crowds out of their erroneous expectations and alert them to the demands and dangers of continuing to follow him. His words should disturb us and challenge us to evaluate the depth of our commitment to follow him. Being gospel words, they also carry power to help us meet the difficult conditions of discipleship.

● **The unsinkable Molly Brown said, "Money is like manure. In order for it to do any good, you have to spread it around." Tell about a treasure in your life that you have managed to spread around.**

● **What more has renouncing possessions given you?**



Solomon prays for wisdom.

Sunday's first reading finds King Solomon in prayer. He wants Wisdom who helped build the universe to labor at his side as he builds the temple. Solomon personifies Wisdom as a feminine spirit, very close to God, who was present when God made the world and who knows and understands all things.

Solomon reflects on how hard it is for humans to know God and live as God wills. No one, he concludes, can know God's intentions without the gift of Wisdom. It is the spirit of Wisdom who straightens the paths of those on earth and saves them.

Solomon's prayer raises the difficulty of following God just as the gospel confronts us with the challenge of following Jesus. Like Solomon, we must pray and open ourselves to Wisdom's guidance and power. Like the gospel that asks us to renounce our possessions, this prayer calls us to get rid of what we think we have in order to make room for what we really need—the spirit of Wisdom who will infuse us with strength to carry on.

Solomon's Prayer

For who knows God's counsel?
Who can discern what God wills?
The reasoning of mortals is
worthless; our plans likely to fail.
For a perishable body weighs
down the soul,
and this earthly tent
burdens the anxious mind.
We can hardly guess at what is on
earth and what is at hand we find
with labor; but who has traced
out what is in the heavens?
Who has learned your counsel,
unless you have given Wisdom
and sent your holy spirit from on
high?
And thus the paths of those
on earth were set straight.

Wisdom 9.13-18

● **For what wisdom do you ask the Holy Spirit?**

PRAY

Pray together to conclude your reflection on the Sunday scriptures. Consider keeping a personal list of people who have walked with you in your life journey.

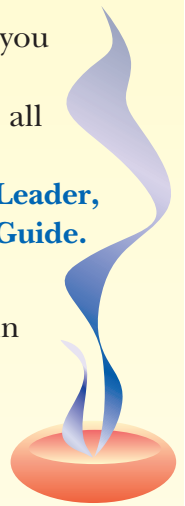
LEADER: (*Reads aloud the names from your opening prayer.*) Loving God, because you permeate all that is and are its life—
ALL: We call you wise and creative Spirit.

LEADER: Because you prepare us for a journey that costs all that we have.

ALL: We call you Leader, Teacher, Savior, Guide.

LEADER: Because you walk with us in trouble and fear.

ALL: We call you Father, Mother, Friend.



Bill Moore is a retired labor movement staff worker, part-time teacher, and union volunteer.

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