

There is a great debate going on in our nation right now as to what we should do about university education. I think everybody agrees that our current system is broken. Costs have spiraled out of control. And with those costs, student debt has risen to ridiculous levels. Ten days ago, President Biden put forward his plan to eliminate some of those debts, but no one believes that's going to solve the problem. It may not even help the problem.

I don't bring this up to debate the issue. But it came to mind as I was reading our Gospel lesson for today. Because, historically, universities are a relatively recent form of higher education. They've only existed for about a thousand years. A long time, to be sure, but not that long in the grand scheme of human history.

A much older form of education existed before that. One that still exists today, but isn't nearly as common. It's known as an apprenticeship. Apprentices have been around for a lot longer than universities. And they're still a common form of training among tradesmen. Electricians, carpenters, plumbers, they all frequently utilize some form of apprenticeship.

They're not quite the same as they used to be. For one, apprentices don't usually live with their masters anymore. That was how it used to be done. You would live with your master. Be a part of his household. Wake up when he woke up. Eat meals when he ate meals. Go to bed when he went to bed.

Beyond that, though, being an apprentice hasn't changed that much. It still means obeying your master. Unconditionally. Unquestioningly. If he says sweep the floor, then you sweep the floor. If he says carry boxes, then you carry boxes. If he says hold your breath and hop on one foot, then you hold your breath and hop on one foot.

And most of all, it still means working with your master. At first, just watching. Analyzing everything that he does and how he does it. And then later, you're allowed to practice. Repeat the things he does over and over again until you can do them in your sleep. And then, finally, you're given projects of your own to do.

But even then, you can't really claim them as your own. No, even then, they're still the work of your master. Because no matter how well you've done the task, you have still done it under his supervision. He's your quality control if it's not up to par. He's your safety net if you mess up altogether. To be an apprentice is a tremendously humbling thing. But that's partly because being a master craftsman is such a responsibility.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus talks about what it's like to be his disciple. Three times, in fact, he says rather bluntly, "If you do not do this, you cannot call yourself my disciple." And yet, as I was thinking about it, Jesus' definition of discipleship is actually not that far off from the definition of apprenticeship. To be Jesus' disciple is to be his apprentice.

Because the things that Jesus demands of his disciples are really only the things that he demands of himself. He says first, "*If anyone comes after me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*"

"Hate" is a strong word, for anyone. But it's an especially strong word for Jesus. Because hate is one of the things he has preached against. Hating your neighbor is equal to murder in Jesus' eyes. So to hear Jesus say that you must hate everyone you know and love is rather... jarring.

But it's supposed to be. Because when Jesus says that you must hate them to be his disciple, he's saying that you must, for all practical purposes, consider them dead. They must not take one moment of priority over serving your Lord. In fact, you must hate your own life. You must consider your own needs dead in comparison to following Christ.

Even if that means suffering greatly. "*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.*" Now remember, the crucifixion hasn't happened yet. Jesus, of course, knows that it will. But to his disciples gathered there, the cross has no particular significance beyond being an implement of torture and execution. It is the symbol of unjust, corrupt, pagan Roman rulers, and of all the pain they have ever inflicted upon the Jews. It is a symbol deserving of scorn and disgust.

And Jesus says to them, “If you're gonna follow me, then you might as well consider yourself already sentenced to death.” The moment you decide to call yourself a Christian, you might as well go ahead and find yourself a cross to carry around. Because at some point in the not too distant future, you're gonna get nailed to it.

Which makes every single thing a person has in this life pretty much worthless. “*Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*” This road that I'm on leads to priorities you don't have. To suffering you won't like. To a death you don't want. This road leads to me hanging naked, dead, and alone on a cross.

That's what it means to be my disciple. To have no friends and no family. To be abandoned by those you love. To be stripped of all you have. To have even your very life taken away from you. I am the master craftsman of sacrifice. Do you really want to be an apprentice to me?

I kinda wish I had been there to see the crowd's the reaction. Here they are happily following him down the road. Thinking that they are the best disciples in the world. And suddenly he turns and says this.

And then he goes on to tell them that if they're not ready for it, they should just leave. The parable of the man building a tower. If you don't have the money, don't start. The parable of the king going to war. If you don't have the army, don't fight.

Look at yourself. Look at your life. There is no such thing as salt that isn't salty. It's either salt or it's not. You're either Jesus' disciple – with all that comes with it – or you're not. There's nothing in between.

How did the crowd react? Obviously, it didn't drive them all away. There were still eleven disciples who followed Jesus down that road. But even they didn't really meet his criteria. After all, who among them hated his own life? Who among them was ready to die? Who among them had renounced everything for their Lord?

None of them. They all ran when he was arrested. They all cowered in the upper room behind walls and doors after the resurrection. Based on what Jesus says right here, they could not possibly be his disciples.

And yet, that's exactly what he called them. Even in the midst of all of their failures. He continued to call them his disciples. And he continues to call each of us his disciples too.

Because, truth be told, there is a price to be paid for that tower. There is a battle to be won for that king. But it isn't paid in our blood. It isn't fought by our strength. It is paid for in the blood of Jesus Christ. And it is fought by His strength.

Like being an apprentice, being a disciple requires great humility. It means following in our master's footsteps, even when they lead down the path of suffering. It means obeying his command, even when it means giving up all we have. And it means being told that our works are not our own. They belong to Him.

But, like being an apprentice, being a disciple is also a great blessing. Because we do have a Lord, a master craftsman, watching over us. Teaching us how we've failed. Saving us when we ruin what's he's given us. Patiently inviting us into his household. To be a part of his family. To wake up every morning in his service. To eat the food he sets before us. To sleep in the peace of his protection.

To be a disciple, with all of our sin and weakness and failure, is a tremendously humbling thing. But that's because Jesus Christ took on such an awesome responsibility when he became our Lord and Savior. He takes salt that has no saltiness and he makes it salty again. He takes disciples that can't follow in his way, and he makes us his followers again. He takes sinners destined for hell and he makes us saints with the promise of eternal life.

He watches over us with all the love of a Father, all the wisdom of a teacher, and all the encouragement of a friend. And he says, “Don't give up. The road of discipleship is hard. It's lonely. It's painful. But I've already walked this road. I've already shown you the resurrection that waits for you at the end of it. And I will be right by your side all the way. Through all of your pain and your failures and your doubts. Even when you abandon me, I won't abandon you.”

Because our Lord really is the master craftsman of sacrifice. And he sacrificed everything for us. Amen.