

No Prep Necessary

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Luke 14:25-35

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This week a colleague in ministry was describing an advertisement for a church study, educational series, bible study with the following tag line promised in big and bold: 'We will go deep, but there is no prep necessary,'and she wondered if it is possible to quote 'go deep' in study or in discipleship or life together or in our relationships or in any endeavor without any preparation, with no prep necessary. When no prep necessary refers to food, I am reminded of the Morgan Spurlock documentary 'super size me,' in which he ate for 30 days only from the McDonald's menu breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and then measured the outcomes. I can remember about 2½ weeks into the project when he visits his doctor to get his blood work done, the doctor begs him to stop as already he is concerned about what numbers he is seeing.

No prep necessary may be fast and cheap and something done in moderation, but when it becomes our default, it can leave us feeling empty inside or it can temporarily satisfy us with something that turns out to be a mile wide and an inch deep. And in fairness, our lives are stressful enough without adding 'Christian' homework to our list of things to do and our personal stresses. And wasn't it Jesus who said also said, 'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light'? Could we not retranslate that to 'go deep, but no prep necessary'? Is it really fair to make the effort to get out of bed and show up at church only to find out that our work has just begun or that even more is asked of us?

Our most recent pandemic has not really helped on this score. I read an account recently that stated that now that we are no longer prohibited from gathering in person, many people continue to opt to stay away from corporate worship (in some cases somewhere between 25-50%) and not just the immunocompromised or the infirm. We can worship on our own schedule or online, even fast forward when the sermon doesn't seem like it is up to very much, and it is very unlikely that God is going to strike us with a lightning bolt or pour an extra helping of some religious guilt on us. And it is nice to be connected in ways we were not before after all, especially digitally with those we may not be connected with otherwise. Why not opt for the most convenient, the most efficient, the easiest path?

I remember many years ago a Conan O'Brien interview with now disgraced comedian Louis CK back during the great recession in which the comedian was discussing traveling on a recent flight when a member of the flight crew announced an apology: 'ladies and gentleman, I apologize but the inflight Wi-Fi is down.' The person seated next to him got upset. The comedian ended his thought by saying something like this: 'you are in a seat

in the air 30,000 feet up in the sky experiencing the miracle of flight, and you are upset about something you did not even know existed until five minutes ago...’ He concluded by adding: ‘we have everything we want, and we are still miserable.’ And perhaps that illustration points us to a larger truth: the traits we value like character, joy, resilience and even the grind of discipleship are not acquired or experienced as all our wants and desires are satisfied, they are not attained by removing all hardships, but often they forged in and through the crisis, the grind, and the least likely path we could have imagined for ourselves.

Take this church for instance. I am always amazed when I read and hear about the experience of this congregation in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and the diaspora of the church community all over the region, with the church office being run out of another church’s basement in Houston and a long time of living elsewhere as refugees or expats or living in the cleanup and dystopia of this city with so many people gone. And this was before Zoom or internet church or many of the tools that served us well in the pandemic. In Don Frampton’s recent history of St. Charles Avenue Church, he reminds us that after dislocation and destruction, a small gathering of ‘exiles’ returned to worship together in Frampton Fellowship Hall, but it would not be until March 7, 2007 that worship returned to a restored sanctuary.¹ Going deep with no prep necessary would never work in the effort to restore this community of faith in a time of separation, dislocation, and personal challenges across the board. It would take some long nights of prayer, some sweat equity, and lots and lots of planning and pivoting.

I also don’t think ‘go deep, but no preparation necessary,’ is much help in trying to understand our passage from Luke. Jesus says some pretty peculiar and harsh stuff here...things like, whoever comes to me and does not hate mother and father and wife and children and brothers and sisters and yes even life itself cannot be my disciple.’ But perhaps Jesus is reminding us that how we define family is more than just DNA or social class or race or ethnicity, but all who have been claimed with us in the waters of baptism are our mothers and brothers and sisters. I remember a long time ago, hearing someone opine that the only people you can really count on are your family. No one else will truly get you or have your back. But I actually believe that the church exists as a counterbalance to that statement. One of my favorite statements to make (that I believe is true but I have no proof) is that there is nowhere else in society where people who did not grow up together, are not the same generation, are not related to each other, one may be a child, another a teenager, another middle age, another a senior, and yet these people sit on the same pew, they confess and forgive each other’s sins, and they are united in common purpose in living out their baptismal calling in service to Jesus Christ, and maybe in their own way are trying to live out Jesus’ statement that ‘whoever comes to me and does not

¹ Donald R. Frampton, *Welcome Corner: A New History of St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church*, 43-44.

hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself cannot be my disciple.' In their own way, they exist as a community that transcends generations, backgrounds, and DNA, and yet are brought into each other's lives and made responsible for each other and share a common purpose.

Jesus goes further, 'whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple.' In his book on character, Will Willimon reminds us that 'every parent asks his or her children to suffer for their parent's values,' and that 'Martin Luther is reputed to have said that whatever you would sacrifice your daughter [or son] for, that is your god.' Willimon then adds this damning comment about our own era: 'many American families are sacrificing their sons and daughters upon the altar of rampant materialism and the wreckage of such sacrifice is all around us.'² Put differently...the chase for fulfillment never ends...and we cannot fill the God-shaped hole in us with more stuff. We often talk about Jesus' sacrifice on the cross or Jesus' bearing the cross or the cross, the cross, the cross, but here in Luke Jesus is not just talking about his own trip to the cross, but says that some cross bearing is meant for us as well. 'Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.' Jesus assures us that in service to the gospel, we should be prepared for some suffering, perhaps to be misunderstood, we should be prepared to use our time and our resources a bit differently than the normal patterns of the world, we should be prepared to live lives that are meant for more than pursuing our own happiness and maxing out on our own pleasure, but that taking up the cross and following Jesus means there is a deeper calling to our lives, a special purpose for us to pursue, and a principled way of life we are called to live. In other words, we can't say this Jesus guy is great but don't ask me to conform my life to his, we can't say I love Jesus, but I don't want to follow him by being tethered to all the other people he has placed in my life. Or I believe in Jesus but don't want to live with all the consequences of that belief in how I live my life. I want to go deep with no prep necessary.

So, what does the alternative to that look like today? Reformed theologian Cindy Rigby who teaches at Austin Seminary reminds us that at the start of the 21st century, 'there is considerable pressure to try to live the Christian life apart from life in community,' but that if we look to Jesus, so much of his life was spent on others, teaching others, like our lesson today, or sitting at table with others and sharing a meal, cultivating the habit of prayer and even offering an example for his disciples to use, and living life joyfully and boldly with others. To take up the cross and to be his disciple means I think that we are people who live with others, build bridges, pursue relationships, it means we are people who practice table fellowship inside and outside these walls, it means that we pray without ceasing and live life with extravagant generosity even as we continue to sort out how best to use our resources and days to best reflect the faith, hope, and love of

² William H. Willimon, *Calling & Character*, 112-113.

Jesus Christ. We are not mean to do this alone, or by ourselves but in a gathered community in which God can develop our gifts whether we have gifts for teaching or preaching or music or encouragement or evangelism or hospitality or prayer for the whole community or abundant resources to give or the timing to make a phone call at the right moment or the boldness to say I don't think that is right or fair or faithful.³

In an essay several years ago on Flannery O'Connor's fiction, C.E. Morgan writes, paralleling our passage today, that grace is not without cost or in her words, 'grace hurts,' but then she adds 'our pain can be the very path to grace, for it's when we suffer the most, when our sense of self is stripped away, when we have lost what we most dearly cherish, or when physical pain and disease destroy the illusion of our immortality that we can longer avoid the plain truth of who and what we are.' And who are we? According to our passage in Luke, we will never become who we are by chasing the evasive god of fulfillment, but we can only become who we are as we try to become the best of what God has called us to be. And that never happens by ourselves, it never happens in the quest to go deep with no preparation, it never happens without some dark nights of the soul and long days of grinding. And it never happens without some suffering and cross bearing along the way, and not just by Jesus, but by all of us who try to take up our cross and follow him. Amen.

³ Cynthia Rigby, 'The Christian Life,' in the *Cambridge Companion to Reformed Theology*, 106.