

John 15:1-8 10/10/13 (#9 Red Letters) “**Letters of Discipleship**”

So, I’m not big into Halloween, but I heard one last week that I have to share:

Two nuns were driving through Transylvania when all of a sudden Dracula appeared in front of them causing them to make a sudden stop!

One of the nuns says to the other one, "Quick show him your Cross!"

So the other nun rolls down the car window and yells, "Get out of the way you crazy count! We’re trying to get through here!"

You know, cross...

Well, just as people might get the cross a little mixed up, so people can easily get their image of Jesus mixed up as well. And so we’ve been taking the time in this series to get the real picture. To get to know Jesus from Jesus’ own words, the Red Letters of the Bible. Today we’re going to get **His** picture of **us**, of who we are supposed to be as His disciples. And we’re going to find out that we often get that image mixed up as well.

In fact, folks, to be honest, I think a lot of Christians have this image of what it means to be a Disciple.

Slide: Joel Osteen “Your Best Life Now”

And a lot of what Joel says is just great. And it’s much better to think positively than to think negatively. You can learn a lot from his books, but the fact is that if you define “Your best life” as anything to do with health and wealth, then a disciple of Christ is just not guaranteed anything like that. I mean can you imagine that message flying for the first Christians: Here they are facing the lions and here’s Joel saying “your best days are ahead of you.” Well, yeah, their best eternal days, but not their best days now.

Slide: lions and Joel pic

In fact, we don’t have time to take apart that whole first reading this morning, but the Bible says that Jesus sent out his disciples on a trial run of witnessing, and that reading was the instructions He was giving them as they went out. In other words, this is what you can expect. And among that list, are the following: “Be on your guard against men...” because...

Slide: “They will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues.”

“On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them...”

“Brother will betray brother to death and a father his child”

“Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.”

“All men will hate you because of me...”

You will be... “Persecuted”

“Arrested”

“called Beelzebub”

“killed”

O.k.? Who wants to sign up? That’s why in the next reading Jesus tells the large crowds who were then following Him, that they’d better **count the cost** before deciding to be His disciple. In fact, He tells them:

Slide: “Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33 NIV)

And to be honest, pastors get kind of queasy about a passage like that. And we often try to soften it up so that you don’t run screaming from the building. Is this the Jesus people are thinking of when they say “I like Jesus, but not the church.” The Jesus who demands

everything from you? But folks, the fact is, I don't want to soften that up. Every single one of us should have to wrestle with the meaning of those big Red Letters. Again, He says:

Slide: “**And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.**” (Luke 14:27 NIV)

In the Red Letter Bible study we're doing between worship, we ask: “Is there any real cross that you carry because you follow Christ?” Is there really anything you suffer for the sake of your Savior? And “If not, why not – at this point in this culture?” Are we really following Jesus? I came across this pic in my preparation this week. Jesus explaining to a young man of our day

Slide: “No, I'm not talking about Twitter. I literally want you to follow me.”

It's easy to click a mouse or tap a button on a screen. It's not easy to be a true follower of Jesus Christ and to give up everything that would keep us from Him.

The official definition of a disciple is:

Slide: “Someone who learns, or receives instruction from another, accepts those teachings, and implements and spreads them.”

So a disciple on one level is a student, someone who learns, but Jesus is saying loudly and clearly, it doesn't stop there. We have to do something with what we learn...

A tour guide was leading a group through historic buildings in Alexandria, Va., and they visited an old church. The guide said that George Washington had attended services there and pointed to his pew.

A reverent silence fell. The guide, encouraged, went on to tell them that church services back then had been very lengthy--sometimes lasting three hours.

The mood of the moment was shattered when an anonymous voice whispered loudly, "So George Washington slept here too!"

Folks, our worship of God is important. What we do here and the time we spend in His house is valuable and a big part of being a disciple of Jesus. But it is just a part. Jesus doesn't want us to just sit in our pew and be pew potatoes,

Slide: pew potatoes

but to follow Him by doing what he did, seeking and saving the lost, no matter the cost – whether that's a socially awkward moment with our friends, family, coworkers or neighbors, as we share with them how Christ has changed our lives... whether that's a financial cost in returning to God a serious percentage of our income, or potentially a greater cost as we begin to face the persecution of Christians that is taking place all around the world.

By the way, let me ask you a question, do you think Jesus counted the cost of the cross? He absolutely did. He counted it for eternity in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit before mankind was ever created. He counted it again in the garden of Gethsemane. Remember? Our Savior Jesus counted the cost of saving you on His knees, and the thought of it caused sweat like great drops of blood to fall from His brow. On that cross He wouldn't just bear the suffering caused by spikes and the thirst and the loss of blood, He would be bearing the responsibility for the sins, the wrongdoing of every person who ever lived and who will ever live. He would take the punishment for it so that we could be forgiven. Before that He would live without a home or any property to His name. He would be rejected and betrayed, mocked,

scourged, forsaken... all because of His love for you and because He wants you to be with Him forever.

That my friends is the Gospel – the Good News of Salvation that is there for us regardless of how good a disciple you have been, or how bad. It's the Good News that can change the course of your life, from a wasted life lived only for you, to a life of meaning and hope.

To that end we have the beautiful and frightening and comforting and challenging reading from John 15:

Slide: 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful...

5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1–5 NIV)

Folks, do you realize how absolutely arrogant a statement like that is unless Jesus really is the Son of God and the Savior of the world?! That's one of the big lessons we are learning in the Red Letters. Jesus does not give you the luxury of just responding to Him as a great teacher or philosopher. He doesn't present Himself to the world in that way at all. Either you accept Him as Lord, or He must be a liar or a lunatic. “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” He says. If He's not Lord, He's certainly pretty full of Himself, isn't He? But He is Lord, and the more you remain in Him and in His Word, receiving His Body and Blood in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, the more that becomes clear to you and the more your life can become.

Of course the text says that our God will also “prune us.” In other words He will sometimes cut us back for our own good in order that we can be even more fruitful. I've been under that knife, actually it's kind of an ongoing process. And it can be frustrating and painful at the time. You want to go in a certain direction in life, or with your life, and God confronts you with His word and says “No, that's not right. I don't care how much you want to go that way, that's not My way. And as long as you remain in me, that's something we're going to have to change.” And “snip”, He cuts us back...and it may not be pleasant at the moment, but you know, I've always found out that God's plans for me are better than my own, and the Lord only cuts and snips and shapes us so that our lives might be all that they can be and we can bear more abundant fruit for Him.

Folks, there is a grapevine in Hampton Court near London that is over 240 years old.

Slide: Hampton Court vine

Its single root is now 12 feet around. Because of skillful cutting and pruning, that one vine produces about 700 lbs of grapes every year. And even though some of the smaller branches are over 100 feet from the main stem, they bear plenty of fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them. Folks, this is a very simple truth Jesus wants you to know in these words today: If you as a disciple of Christ, want life in all its fullness, then you must be connected to Him.

Another thing that becomes clear in this analogy is that we don't just have a connection to Jesus Christ, the Vine. When we are connected to **Him**, we are also linked inseparably to **each other**...And it's only as all of us together are cared for and pruned, and receive our nourishment from the vine, that we are able to bring forth the best harvest for Him and realize our full potential in life.

Have you ever taken a close look at a grape vine? You know they are not really very pretty. They're all kind of gnarly and twisted and they look half dead, nevertheless, life is there, isn't it, and it bears fruit. And the church is often the same way.

You know in the Lutheran Church, we talk about the distinction between faith and works: that we are justified by faith alone – in Jesus Christ. That His sacrifice on the cross paid for the sins of the whole world. And that we are saved by Grace alone – that the only reason God sent His son for us is that He loves us – not because of anything we have done. And I think this analogy of the vine is the perfect way to understand that distinction. I'm sure I've described this before... Leaves use up nutrients in the process of photosynthesis. As the leaves consume nutrients in the sap, a suction is formed, which draws more sap from the roots. Without the sap, the leaves and fruit and branches would die. But the continual flow of this sap comes only as it is used up by the work of the leaf.

Well folks, it's the same with us. We get our real and abundant life through faith in Christ. But a continual supply of fresh spiritual nutrients depends on our willingness to "consume" the old supply to bear the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and selfcontrol.

Folks, Jesus wants you to be more a big swollen branch with all the life and love that He pumps into you. As C.S. Lewis said: "You cannot go on being a good egg forever. You must either hatch or rot." God wants you to hatch. God wants you to bear fruit. He wants you to bear much fruit. And He gives you the power to do so – as you remain in Him.

Lord Jesus, once again I thank you for Your Red Letters. However much we think of You, we continue to find out that You are more. Bless what we've heard today. Bless the Red Letter presentations tonight and tomorrow and Tuesday, that we may become Your disciples in truth, living to make more and better disciples by sharing Your love. Amen.