“Large crowds were traveling with [Jesus]” but I’m not sure they knew where he was going. Maybe they didn’t care. Jesus was getting lots of attention and perhaps they wanted to be in the limelight with him to join what they considered to be a celebrity cult. I’m not sure that they counted the costs involved to take this journey. And Jesus is clearly not interested in church growth. If he is, this is definitely not how you do it! He’s headed to “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it” (Luke 13:34). He’s headed in the direction of his death and this is a costly mission. It will cost him his life. If we intend to follow him, we, too, will have to die. Even as we hear the faint echoes of the drumbeat of a potential war on the global horizon and hear what Pope Francis stated at the Vatican’s Vigil of Peace yesterday: that “violence and war are the language of death,” we should remember that to be a Christian disciple means to also talk about death. We are disciples of death. When presiding at the Lord’s table, we may even sometimes use the words of the apostle Paul, “we proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” The communion table is a proclamation of death. Dying is an essential part of the portfolio of every disciple. But this has nothing to do with sermons that kill parishioners with judgment or bore people to death.

It is being attuned to what German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] come and die.” Bonhoeffer meant this literally and manifested a congruence between his lip service and life service. He walked his talk. He returned to his homeland, Germany, to oppose the Nazi regime, even after invitations from American theological institutions to teach and remain in the United States. He put his life on the line and eventually was hanged in April 1945 for his opposition to Hitler. “When Christ calls [us], he bids [us] come and die.”

But we don’t want really want to die, do we? Cosmetic plastic surgeries. Fad health diets. Physical fitness regiments. Vitamins for vitality and stamina. Glorification of images of youthful beauty. We don’t really want to die. We want to live, and maybe, forever. We understand life, as we know it, and because of this, we want to last forever. We can see life and smell it and taste it and hear it and feel it. But death? What’s behind that dark door is unknown, a _mysterium tremendum_. This is why Jesus says to estimate the cost, count the cost, of building a tower or waging war. Jesus does not want us to “drift into discipleship” (Dallas Willard). But to count the cost of discipleship. To contemplate before you act. To “check the edge of the axe before splitting wood.” (Nigerian proverb) Discipleship costs and to use the words of T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding,” “costing not less than everything.”

Everything. Everything that we might be attached to—our family, our life, our possessions. “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.” To our contemporary ears, ‘hate’ sounds so harsh. One commentator notes that to hate is a Semitic expression “meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from” (Fred Craddock). It maybe hyperbole. But it is clear that the call to discipleship is a call to detachment, detachment from that which one loves so deeply, including oneself. It is to relinquish relational and socioeconomic safety and control because discipleship is not safe. It can be deadly as Bonhoeffer learned.

Even at the turn of the 3rd century, there was Perpetua, a Christian noblewoman, who lived with her husband, her son, and her slave, Felicitas, in Carthage. During this time, North Africa was the center of a vibrant Christian community. Thus, when Roman emperor Septimius Severus decided to crack down on Christianity because he thought it hindered Roman patriotism, he focused his attention on North Africa.
The first people he arrested were five new Christians taking classes to prepare for baptism, one of which was Perpetua.

Her father immediately visited her in prison. He begged her to deny that she was a Christian in order to save herself. But she replied to him, "Father do you see this vase here?" "Could it be called by any other name than what it is?" "No," he replied. "Well, neither can I be called anything other than what I am, a Christian." Perpetua was eventually moved to another part of the prison and allowed to breastfeed her child. Her father visited again, knowing that her hearing was fast approaching and pleaded with her again: "Have pity on my gray head. Have pity on me, your father, if I deserve to be called your father, if I have favored you above all your brothers, if I have raised you to reach this prime of your life." He threw himself down before her and kissed her hands. "Do not abandon me to be the reproach of men. Think of your brothers; think of your mother and your aunt; think of your child, who will not be able to live once you are gone. Give up your pride!"

Perpetua was touched but remained unshaken. She tried to comfort her father—"It will all happen in the prisoner's dock as God wills, for you may be sure that we are not left to ourselves but are all in his power"; her father walked out of the prison dejected. The day of the hearing arrived. Perpetua and her friends were marched before the governor, Hilarianus. Perpetua's friends were questioned first, and each one admitted to being a Christian, and each refused to make the imperial sacrifice to the Unconquered Sun. The governor turned to question Perpetua.

At that moment, her father, carrying Perpetua's son in his arms, burst into the room. He grabbed Perpetua and pleaded again, "Perform the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby!"

The governor, probably wishing to avoid the unpleasantness of executing a mother who still suckled a child, added, "Have pity on your father's gray head; have pity on your infant son. Offer the sacrifice for the welfare of the emperor." Perpetua replied simply: "I will not." "Are you a Christian then?" asked the governor. "Yes I am," Perpetua replied. Her father interrupted again, begging her to make the required sacrifice, but the governor had heard enough: he ordered soldiers to beat him into silence. He then condemned Perpetua and her friends to die in the arena.

Perpetua, her friends, and her slave, Felicitas (who had subsequently been arrested), were dressed in belted tunics. When they entered the stadium, wild beasts and gladiators roamed the arena floor, and in the stands, crowds roared to see blood. They didn't have to wait long. Immediately a wild heifer charged the group. Perpetua was tossed into the air and onto her back. She sat up, adjusted her ripped tunic, and walked over to help Felicitas. Then a leopard was let loose, and it wasn't long before the tunics of the Christians were stained with blood. The crowd was so impatient that they began calling for the death of the Christians. Perpetua, Felicitas, and friends were lined up, one by one, and were slain by the sword. (Christianity Today) The blood of the martyrs fertilizes the soil of our discipleship.

Discipleship can be deadly, literally, as this martyr story reveals, and as we hear of modern day stories of how Christians are persecuted throughout the world. Yet, its cost may not always manifest in this way. However, discipleship will always be costly because of its abandonment of attachment. Those things, those people, my own life, are relinquished in pursuit of God. Christian discipleship dominates so-called “family values” that take center stage in our political-rhetorical discourse of today. Family relations, no matter how good, or our possessions, no matter how abundant, are not salvific; they are not the keys to the kingdom of God. Jesus redefines our relationships, especially when we realize that discipleship means that our closest companions on the journey are a cross and the Christ. And we do not own either of them. We own nothing. We travel naked because discipleship “[costs] not less than everything.” Everything we think we own. Everything to which we are attached. We don't really want to die, naked, do we? We love our family. We love our life. We love our things. Gollum, in “The Lord of the Rings” movie, loved the ring, “my precious.” “Mine!” Yet, Christian discipleship says, “Thine!”
Do we really mean it when we sing that hymn “where he leads me I will follow”? I’m just not sure we want to go to Jerusalem with Jesus. That means we would have to carry a cross and follow him. That means we would have to die because it is a one-way journey. No turning back. No turning back. The life you think you have won’t be returned. Your life, as you know it, will die because you will be bearing a cross not a crown. Through the interpretive lens of early church father, Tertullian, Jesus basically declares, “Take up your stress and your tortures.” One’s detachment from family, life, and possessions, leads to attachment to a tool of torture. This teaching is not going to win any popularity contests because who in their right mind wants to be tortured? Who wants to be deemed a condemned criminal without the possibility of a re-entry program into society?

In those days, a common criminal carried the cross (the horizontal beam of the cross) out to where the upright stake would be in the midst of a mad, jeering mob. No one in their right mind would choose this fate for oneself because we don’t really want to die. We want to live as long as possible. We want to prosper. We like candy Christianity.

The Reverend Gardner Taylor, the great Baptist pulpiteer whom some call “the dean of American preaching,” a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in the year 2000, and after whom the Divinity School has a named lectureship series and who currently resides in Durham at 95 years old, was interviewed in 2006 by Religion and Ethics Newsweekly. He was asked to assess the current state of Christian preaching. What he says is illuminating. He declares the following:

...there is now a tendency, I think, more than ever, to make it a kind of Sunday Chamber of Commerce exercise — motivational speaking, which has its place but is not the Gospel. It becomes a kind of opium, if opium is a stimulant, for people, which gives them often a false notion of what life is all about. I think much of contemporary preaching does not prepare people for the inevitable crises of life. When we talk constantly about prosperity, well, life is not constantly prosperity. It has adversity and difficulties, and if one is trained, conditioned to see only the bright side of things, then one is not prepared for living in this world.

...Of course, people want to hear it, because candy is a very pleasant thing. . . When [my daughter] was a little girl, I suppose we could have fed her candy morning, noon, and night, and she would have taken it morning, noon — and enjoyed it. Soon she would have had no teeth, and soon we would have had no daughter, I think, because candy is wonderful. I love it, but one needs in one’s diet more than candy.

Taylor’s notion that a prosperity-only message is like “candy” suggests that this type of theology and approach to Christianity is initially sweet to the taste, a “pleasant thing,” but in the end it is detrimental because life is not just about the “bright side of things.” If one chews on this pain-free prosperity message long enough, one will end up with “no teeth” because “one needs in one’s diet more than candy.” Prosperity theology may be sweet like a candy cane at first but it will eventually be sour for the soul and bad for one’s spiritual teeth and nerve. It is destructive to one’s discipleship because it is a false, distorted picture of the gospel and represents an anorexic theology of death and suffering.

Jesus calls us to come and die, to carry the cross. Christian discipleship is not candy; it is cross-y and requires a crucified commitment. Bonhoeffer says that “suffering is the badge of true discipleship.” We bear the weight of the suffering of the world and this invitation from Jesus “is not a short-term, one-time hoisting up of temporary troubles, but a recurrent, lifelong, carrying of one’s cross” (John Nunes). That means the smell and touch death are always around. That means you live to die.

This is not a form of euphoric religion. Jesus doesn’t even call us to be happy nor religious. He calls us to follow him. The cost of discipleship may include attachment to a cross but at the same time it involves detachment from human knowledge. The call to be detached from family, life, possessions, is not only a call to attachment to the way of the cross, but it is a call to be detached from knowing anything familiar. “Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something, which is void of all content. It give us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a
cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion, even the devotion of ourselves” (Bonhoeffer).

As Christians we embody a migratory subjectivity. Migration is what Jesus does and as we follow we become pilgrims through this barren land on the journey to Jerusalem with Jesus. The call to discipleship is a call to always be on the move, never quite stationary, never quite comfortable, as we move away from what is familiar and secure and known to us (home, family, possessions) to an unfamiliar, and even insecure, territory where we do not know what awaits us. We only know whom we follow—Jesus—and that the way is cruciform and that on the way we may not even recognize ourselves anymore because the weight of the cross has shaped us on the journey. Our view of Jesus, of Christianity, has to shift when one conforms one’s body, one’s whole life, to a cross. The particulars of our future are unknown because we are not in the know even as our previous conception of the future dies. By no means is this a lucrative career in which one calculates strategically the next move upward. This a cross-shaped calling that spirals downward first before it ever sees the light of a new day.

Like Abraham whom God called from his country, kindred, and father’s house, to an unknown land, we hear a call. A call to follow. A divine voice that actually gives you and me our true vocation in life. That means we do not call the shots. The cost of discipleship is the cost of unknowing even while one learns to love what or whom one does not see clearly. Discipleship transitions us from the finite observable realm to a kingdom with infinite possibilities yet unseen. Clarity is not an essential trait on the road of discipleship. Reformer Martin Luther reminds us, “Bewilderment is the true comprehension. Not to know where you are going is the true knowledge.” Discipleship is not limited to our understanding and knowledge. The call is beyond us, in front of us, yet for us, embodied in the knowledge of God found in Jesus Christ. We don’t wear a spiritual GPS to show us the way. We only wear a cross that belongs to Jesus to show us that he is the way. The way to die. But we don’t really want to die, do we?

It is as tough and rough as a wooden piece of an old-rugged cross. Yet, I know we must die that we might live. Discipleship will cost you your life while at the same time giving you the life you’ve always needed and wanted anyway. If we are honest with ourselves, we might agree with what Quaker writer, Parker Palmer, says: “the life that I am living is not the life that wants to live in me.” Thus, to find the life that wants to live in me, I follow the one outside of me who declares, “follow me.” We follow to find life though it is a life you gain while on a trajectory toward death.

As disciples, we follow a living Jesus who is always on the move. You can’t pin him down, even on a cross or in a grave. You don’t know where he’ll lead next and his only command is “follow me” because he is a God who desires to be with us. This is why he calls us and yearns to be in communion with us on the journey. Jesus wants our company, though in fact he is our true company, our companis (in Latin), literally meaning ‘with bread.’ Thus, when in his company, we are with bread, our bread, the bread of life. This bread may be hard to swallow because before we taste life, we have to taste death. When with him, we eat the bread of suffering. We die but we don’t do it alone. Perpetua was right: “we are not left to ourselves” and at the same time as we are dying to live, Jesus provides new life for us by allowing us to feast on him and follow him on the road less traveled. It is a daily journey and the journey is long. In the gospel reading, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem. But in our time, you never know where he might go. He might go to Syria or Durham or Duke or straight to your heart to transform it into the costly shape of a cross so that you may testify “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). May it be so now and forever. Amen.