

Rev. Billy Cerveny:

You know, one of the things I love about being a priest at St. Mark's is I grew up in this church. And so every day I'm faced

with some sort of nostalgic memory, whether I turn a corner or see a person or encounter, you know, some aspect of life. And the other day I was going through a box of old photos, and I was looking at just pictures of myself as a young person, but also mostly of the ones of me in high school. Now I grew up, and I went to Episcopal during the 80s, and looking at those pictures, like, you know, going from the very beginning till up until now. It's like this essay in different hairstyles that I had during those times, right? And if you were a high school person when when during the 80s, like I was, you know, you did things like I pegged my pants. Anybody else do that? You pegged your pants? Yeah, you did.

We used to go down to Five Points, and we'd go to this place called Edge City, which was this little store back there. Yeah, Edge City. And we'd get these pink polka dot skinny ties. I get checkerboard van tennis shoes. It was so edgy back in those days, right? It was scandalous. Nothing was as scandalous, though as the time that I went over to Matt Hemphill's house and I spent the night with him and he pierced my left ear with one of those oversized diaper pins, you know, that they used to have. And coming home the next day and my ear was like terribly infected. But that was the 80s. Those are the kind of stuff you did. And I remember there was, during that time, there was this one haircut that people got, and I don't it's kind of cringy to say it now, but we used to call it a punk haircut. I want to get a punk haircut, and all these guys were getting. I played soccer, a lot of soccer players got it. And what it was, it was kind of this David Bowie thing. It was very long in the back. It was clean over the ears. It was straight across the front, and it was spiky on the top. And it was cool, man. Doesn't sound like it does it but it was back in those days. And I remember talking to my mom and trying to convince her because I wanted it so bad. I'm like, "Mom, please let me go get a punk haircut. Let me get a punk haircut." And eventually she caved in, and she took me over to Fonda's, put me in the chair, put the, you know, the apron on me, and Fonda pulls out the stairs, getting ready to cut my hair. I remember my heart was sort of pounding really hard. I'm like, "Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait,

wait, wait, wait, wait. Let's negotiate this. Let me see. Do I really want to do this?" I remember getting scared, and I thought to myself, "Okay, what I'm gonna do? I think I'm just gonna go halfway here. I'm gonna do a lesser version. I'm like, "So I want to keep it long in the back, clean it over my ears straight across the top, but don't do the spikes on the top." All right? Well, there are certain things in this life that you learn that you can't just do halfway.

Punk haircuts, for example. And I learned that the following day, as I was hiding in the men's room at Episcopal High School because all my friends were making fun of me, staring in the mirror, and realizing that without those spikes, I didn't get a softer version of this edgy haircut. And I didn't have this sort of edgier version of a normal haircut. I had this new thing all together. I look like Lloyd Christmas from the Dumb and Dumber movies. It was really, really bad. Because what happens in that moment is that when you're half in and you're half out, you think you're trying to preserve the integrity of both of those worlds, the normal haircut and the edgy haircut. But you don't. You ruin both of them. You ruin the edgy haircut, and you ruin the normal haircut. And I thought to myself in those moments, as reflecting for this sermon, I realized what a picture of life. Half in and half out is rarely a good idea. But never is there a more glaring of an example as being half in and half out of our Christianity. Of the faith that we have that we declare for Jesus. To stick one foot in but have one foot in the world. Now I don't know your story. I know a lot of your stories. Maybe you grew up in the church. Maybe you came to church later in life, and you had faith later in life. But whatever it is, I'm guessing that most of us in this room have had that moment where it's like, I'm gonna surrender to Jesus. I surrender all. We had that moment. How many times if you come to Jesus and you're like, "Alright, I'm here. I'm gonna get that full Christian makeover, and I mean it this time." And then we climb and we sit in the chair, and all of a sudden he pulls his scissors out. We're like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second. Wait a second. Wait a second. Let's negotiate this. I'm into this, but not all the way. Let's, why don't you clean up here but not here? Why don't you give me a trim, take a few inches off over here, that makes my church attendance a little better? But if you could not touch my finances, that'd be great because I'm trying to grow those out a little bit. Or maybe over here, if you could, you can just trim this part over here. Maybe make my language a little better in public. But if you

don't mind not touching my marriage, or maybe if you don't mind not touching the way I drink or my sexuality or the way that I joke around with my friends, that's great. I'm half in, I'm half out. But like with that haircut, here's what happens. When I'm half in, I'm half out, I don't make one, I don't make create a more palatable version of Christianity. And I certainly don't create a cleaner version of my normal civilian life. What happens is I poison both of them. It's like A.W. Tozier said, "We are too Christian to enjoy sinning and too fond of sin to enjoy Christianity." What happens, this functionally plays out in a few ways. One way is that we become exhausted. We get worn out with trying to to keep up with Jesus and try to keep Jesus happy so we'll get those blessings in our life. But I also get worn out with trying to serve the world in such a way that it's finally going to to yield the promises that it promised that it would give me. But in practice, when I'm, I am the only one who's ended up paying up things. I'm the only one that's working on this thing. And the world will never give me what it needs. And my Christianity feels very, very anemic. And that's what I begin to feel exhausted and deflated.

Or maybe some of you in here or you have one foot half in and one foot half out, one of that foot in the Christian life and the other one in some secret sin or some toxic area in your life.

And you come to church and you hear God loves you. God loves you. But you've got cards sitting right behind your back. You know what's going on, and you feel like such a fraud. And the problem is you're like, yeah, yeah, you don't feel like God's love you because you know you're dishonest about this, and you can't show your cards because if you showed it to somebody else, what are they going to do? They're going to reject you. You feel like it at least they're going to they're going to push you away.

And so we just live with this shame, and we live in hiding, hoping that no one will ever figure out what's really going on.

What do we do with this? Luke 14 passage I just read.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and things are kind of heating up as Jesus is getting closer there. He's starting to irritate the Pharisees and the ruling class.

He's headed towards the cross. He knows this. There's a massive crowd that's surrounding him. In verse 25, it says now great crowds accompanied him. And he turned and he said to them, if anyone comes to me and it does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and sisters. Yes, even his own life. He cannot be my disciple.

That's hardcore.

Seriously, this goes down as one of the hard sayings of Jesus. That's hard for me to swallow because Jesus is calling people to hate his own father and mother.

Didn't Jesus love his own mama? He did. I know he did.

Now I want to read this. You got to read this in context here. And one of the things I always say is that you need to remember when you read the Bible that scripture was written for you. It was written for you, but it was not written to you, meaning it was written to people a long time ago in a different culture that a different way of speaking. And sometimes the language can be confusing. So what Jesus is doing here when he talks to this hate language he's using, you see this in Hebrew a lot. You find it in scripture where it says God had loved Jacob, but he hated Esau. Or Jacob loved Rachel, but hated Leah.

And what he's saying here this is a Hebrew idiom. What that means is it's a phrase or a word that means something different than what it sounds like. For example, like when I say I'm hot under the collar, what does it mean? I'm angry, right? Or I'm trying to break the ice. Am I really trying to break ice? No, I'm meeting someone. I'm trying to get a conversation going. And so what's happening here is that to say that to this hate language, it's less about despising something and it's more about loving another thing. More importantly, Jesus is language. He's not telling people they have to viscerally hate their moms and their dads in their life.

What he's saying here is that you need to prioritize your affections around him. That he is the point of this. It's echoes of the first commandment. It says

you have no other gods before me. That I need to be your first love, your first commitment, your first allegiance. I need to be your priority over every other aspect in your life.

It's pretty intense, right? Well, Jesus doubles down in verse 20, 70 says, whoever does not bear his own cross and comes after me cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?

So he's saying, follow me, and you got to carry this cross. That's something I remind you of, that we always talk about carrying your cross. Even non-Christians will talk about, you know, we all have our cross to bear. Now, back in the first century, that was not a metaphor that had worked itself into their normal language. That's something that came much later in our time.

To them, when Jesus is talking about carrying a cross, a cross represented one thing. It was a torture device. It was an implement of capital punishment by Rome. So when the people are here and they're listening to Jesus, they are very confused. Carrying my cross. Like, what are you talking about?

But for us as Christ followers that live at this part of the story, we know that what Jesus is saying is that we to carry our cross, is that we have to submit everything.

My family, my money, the way I interact with others, my politics, my relationships, every aspect of this.

And what Jesus, and that cuts deep. And Jesus is saying you have to be willing to sacrifice everything and reconsider everything in your life for his sake to make him a priority.

And he takes it even further. He goes, do you could you think you can do that?

What I want you to do now is I want you to consider, and he uses the analogy of the man building the tower and the king going off to war. He goes, I need

you to count the cost. I need you to measure whether you think you can do this, whether you want this.

And one of the things I love about Christianity, it's one of my favorite things that really drew me deeper and later in life when I became an adult, is that it always appeals to a reason.

Christianity, throughout the New Testament and even the Old Testament, it always calls us to faith. Always. But it never calls us to blind faith.

It doesn't call us to just step into this open religious void that doesn't make sense, that we are to be these lobotomized followers of Jesus. That's not what he does.

You see here, Jesus, he says, measure the truth, weigh the evidence, because he knows that when we measure it, when we weigh it, when we understand it, when we digest it, it's the only way that we will be able to make a heartfelt commitment to follow Jesus.

By understanding and metabolizing it in that way. You ever wonder why the Bible is written the way it's written? It's biography. It's poetry. It's history. It's this apocalyptic literature that's mystical and speaks of times that have yet to come. And there's even a one act play in the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes. There's all these different things. Why is it that way?

Because it's this extensive communication from God, this extensive proof that God is laying out and saying to people because he's trying to appeal to every aspect of our character and our personage and all the ways that we live and move and have our being as people.

Through art, through history, through our understanding, through our intellect, so we can reason with it, so we can wrestle with it.

It's what sets our faith apart from these other religions is that it's far too rational for just being this woo woo mystical pie in the sky kind of thing.

The Lord is speaking to our minds, but it's also way too relational. And it's way too personal and way too mystical for people to treat God like some Rubik's Cube that we can solve.

He's some math problem, and that we could somehow beat God into submission with our intellect. It straddles. It just it embraces both the mystical and the rational.

So Jesus says, count the costs. So what's he saying? He's saying measure first, measure me.

Is Jesus who he says he is? Am I the Messiah? Am I God incarnate? Did I step from the tomb? Did I die and step from the tomb? Was I raised from the dead?

If you say no, then no cost. Go about your day. But if you say yes, ah, that changes everything, doesn't it? If you say yes, if Jesus is who he says he is, then we have to totally and completely reorder our priorities. We have to totally and completely reorient the way we think about our lives. The cost can't be. We cannot be half in. We cannot be half out.

But what Jesus is also saying is count the cost. Am I who I say I am? And the cost, he's also calling us to count. He's saying this. Can you measure yourselves like that builder who walks in and says, do I have enough money to build this thing that I've set out to build like this guy who's this, aren't this general who's stepping in, or the king who's stepping into a battle? Do I have the troops to win this battle that I'm stepping into? Jesus is saying, can you be fully committed? Can you answer the call to be a disciple? Can you not be half in, half out? Because what does he say at the end of this passage? If you do not renounce all that you have, you cannot be my disciple.

How are you doing with that? Man. How many of you, when you hear this, you don't have to raise your hand, but you can if you want. How many of you hear passages like that? It makes your chest tighten. It kind of makes you nervous. Mine does. Because I tell you what, I can't do that. I can't. I know I'm half in and half out all the time.

I know the way that I live. I know my heart is fickle. It clings to the things of this world. Like it says in Romans seven, when Paul is writing about his struggle as a Christian. He's saying, I know what I'm saying. I know the things I should do, but I don't do them. I desire to do the will of God and to follow God, but the very thing I don't want to do, I end up doing. I am half in, and I am half out.

I know that about myself.

Do you know that about yourself?

See, Jesus does.

Jesus knows that about me; he knows that about you. And if you feel that tension in your heart as we're reading that passage, then this passage is doing its job. Because that's why Jesus is doing what he's doing. He's stepping on the gas for a reason.

Who's he speaking to? He's speaking to these Jewish people. And they were there, and they were following the Mosaic law.

And what the Mosaic law said, you had to obey God perfectly.

You had to live a certain way. You had to eat a certain way. You could touch certain things at a certain time and not touch other things at a certain time. You couldn't be around certain people. And if you did, you were ceremonial and unclean. If you didn't, you were not clean.

And all of these people that Jesus was talking to, he's telling them that he's amplifying the law for them. And the implied response from these people, as Jesus is saying, you can't be half in and half out. You gotta follow him. You gotta renounce everything. What people's implied response here is the same as yours. Who can live up to that standard?

It's like on Matthew chapter five, when Jesus is given the Sermon on the Mount. And he's standing up there and he says, "If you've ever even called your brother a fool, you're guilty of murder."

If you ever lusted in your mind, you're guilty of adultery.

And everyone said, "Who could live up to that standard?"

If that's your reaction,

that's exactly what Jesus is trying to get us to feel.

And he's not doing this to condemn us, but he's doing it to drive us to his grace.

He's doing us to drive us to see who we are, the weakness of who we are, the strength of who it is, the purity of who he is, and our need for a savior.

See, the truth is, if I could be a disciple that lived up to those standards, if I could do it right like that, like this passage is pointing me towards, why would I need a savior?

I could just be like, "Scoreboard, let me in, Jesus.

"I'm your guy.

"Like I'm the MVP, but I can't. "None of us can, that's the whole point. "We're all half in and half out."

These parables that Jesus is holding up, this parable about the builder and the king, they aren't these motivational narratives trying to give you tips on how to do it better. They're mirrors.

He's holding it up and saying, "Hey, this is a mirror for you to look at. "Wait a second, you know what? "When I do count the cost, "I don't have enough money to do this. "I don't have enough spiritual troops to win this battle. "I can't do it."

And the good news is, while we might be half in and half out disciples,

Jesus is an all in savior.

He is all in.

Where I can't renounce all that I have. Jesus did.

Where I can't humble myself, because I am addicted to the glory of this world.

Jesus did. He humbled himself. He became a man. He lived the perfect life. He suffered the indignities of the world and the scorn and the rejection, and the ridicule of others.

Whereas I can't carry my cross,

Jesus carried his cross once and for all for the thousand times a day that I drop my own.

Where I don't count the cost fully, and I don't even know how to count the cost fully, Jesus counted the cost. And he paid it fully when he climbed on the cross, and he died for you, and he died for me.

He did that to bear the cost of our failed discipleship.

My inability to do this,

he bore the cross and loved us perfectly because of the way my heart loves so imperfectly. Why?

To get his reward. You've heard me say this a hundred times. I'll say it again. What was his reward? It was you.

It's you. It's me.

Jesus is in the business of making unholy things holy.

He reaches down and he touches those things that are unclean and he makes them clean. He takes half disciples and he calls them children of God.

That is the scandal of the gospel.

So what does it mean for us as Christ followers to be full disciples of Jesus?

It means something very different than when we were under the law.

For us to be disciples, to be full disciples, it doesn't mean that we have to get it perfectly. We have to be perfectly loyal. It means that we begin to realize that we're not the true disciples. Jesus is.

He was the one that follows the Father perfectly, that loves us perfectly.

It begins when we accept our inability to renounce enough.

My inability to even love Jesus enough, and the trajectory of my faith, becomes about me receiving the love and blessing and grace of God.

Not about me white-knuckling it to perfection so I can cross some invisible finish line that I will never make.

When I begin to surrender this, it transforms my life. It transforms my heart. Here's what happens.

Humility is born.

Humility is born. It's a relief from this exhaustion because I no longer have to depend on myself. I am leaning on Jesus and depending on what he is doing rather than what I'm doing.

That shame begins to evaporate and begins to blow away because I have to stop. I can stop hiding those broken parts of my life. I don't need to keep those cards behind my back of those things. I can bring them to Jesus and be like, are you really that good? Are you really that good? Do you really accept

sinner as bad as me? Because look at that. Look at this one and this one. You still in? What about this one? Are you still in? And Jesus says, yes, bring it all.

You don't have to hide any more, and we all have these cards.

And when I begin to experience that, and I have brothers and sisters in Christ that experience the same thing, they have the same cards. Guess what? I can stop hiding from you.

I can stand up here as a priest, as someone who's charged with opening the word of God. You say, guess what? I don't have this together.

I don't.

And God, in his ironic sense of humor, has tagged my ear to do this for a particular reason. Not to call us to perfection, but to call us to grace. Because I assure you, no one needs that more than I do.

The irony that I'm standing in a pulpit where the greatest mistakes in my life have been committed within a five square mile radius of this one spot. Don't laugh too hard because half of y'all were there.

But that's the grace of God.

That's the goodness of God.

Where would we be without it?

Grace does for us what the law could never do for us. It changes our hearts. It gives birth to a graced shaped obedience.

And what that obedience looks like, it's born of gratitude, not out of compulsion.

Jesus becomes my priority because where would I be without him?

What sort of existential free fall would I step into if I didn't have Jesus?

I begin to love others the way that I have been loved. Even when I don't wanna do it,

I begin to serve others the way I've been served, even when I have needs of my own that are screaming out loud.

And we do it because we've been loved and served that way. See, when we love him like that, it sets us free. And then guess what we can do now?

All those things that he listed in the beginning, your mother, your father, your children, your wife, your husband, your life, we can begin to love those things well. We can begin to love them as God intended.

With Jesus on the throne and our hearts set free. Amen. Amen.