

My dad was a salesman. First he was on the sales desk at Union Tractor in Calgary. Then he sold refined petroleum products to gas stations for Canadian Oil (remember White Rose Gas Stations?) which was purchased by Shell. Then he moved into marketing with Pacific Petroleums and opened a number of Pacific 66 Stations here in BC. When we returned to Calgary he sold manufactured steel products used in commercial building projects, and went on to become the Western Regional Sales Manager for Walker Marketing – the muffler company. Late in his career Dad moved offices and companies around in commercial real estate and because he had a hard time retiring, he went back to selling new homes for a builder in Calgary. He finally retired about 73.

My dad was my best confidant when it came to talking about business matters. When I was in marketing in the arts, I would often pick my dad's brain about how to motivate buyers. We'd talk about the kinds of promotion activities I would organize. We talked about advertising and sales promotion strategies for theatre. We talked about how to promote my own newly formed communications company. I valued my dad's advice and he taught me a lot.

Whenever we talked, he would bring up his mom, who was also a sales person. She did retail dress sales when she went back to work. Eventually she bought and sold mail order stationary products and I can remember driving with her on the highways and gravel roads of Southern Alberta on behalf of Spencer Supports, helping women fit into custom designed corsets. It was like I was fitting into the family way of life...even though I'd not ever given it much thought. I had a different set of talents, but essentially I was doing the same kind of work.

When I moved to Summerland in the Okanagan, to become the manager of Marketing and Development for Naramata Centre, a retreat and educational facility of the United Church, it was a bit of a shock for my dad. What's a retreat centre? Who pays to go to that? AND worse why would anyone want to move to British Columbia? It's expensive and it's hilly...roads are winding. Dad was a true prairie boy. Regardless, Dad and I still found stuff to talk about, with respect to work. I continued to seek his advice although he didn't have as much to say about selling God programs to members of the church.

However, when I pursued a call to ministry and stayed in BC, well, we seemed to stop talking about my work altogether. In his Christmas letters, my dad referred to my call

to ministry as a new assignment. That's all he ever said about it. My call to ministry, and my subsequent delight in helping people come to a self-actualized relationship with God, modeled in the life and ministry of Christ is a blessing to me. You've heard me speak about why I do what I do...in complete gratitude to God, celebrated through the church, for giving my life back to me. And I believe fully, that while this privilege of giving my life to the church may bring peace to me, in my father's experience it likely brought a sword that separated us forever.

I said last week if Jesus is anything, he is unequivocal. And here he is again. Jesus is not mincing words. He is not letting his followers get off easy to rest safely in a comfortable pew. There is no wiggle room in what Jesus is telling his disciples just before he sends them into the towns and villages where he would not be able to go. The cost of discipleship is very high. It's not to be taken lightly. There's no room for equivocation; for hemming and hawing.

I get how Jesus might be addressing me as an individual and how each of us might hear these words, individually. That's what was interesting in our conversation at Waves yesterday. Everyone seemed to be pretty calm over what sound like really harsh words. Someone said: "I get why this deep, transforming, love of God, separates us from our tribes. This is the cost of loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." I agree. When you give up all the false ideas you ever had about yourself and the way the world works, which are rampant around us, and focus on the life God has gifted you, you are free. The way the world operates, with labels and judgments, no longer sticks. There is less anxiety; there is more love, curiosity and compassion.

But how does a community of faith hear these words? How does a congregation hear words of self-differentiation and the natural consequence of separating from our family story by going more deeply into a relationship with Christ? In light of the very challenging outcome of last week's annual meeting, which left us pretty divided on matters of finance, how do we hear these frank words about the cost of discipleship?

I want to offer a word of hope in what I saw last Sunday. I saw a beautiful group of people, honestly, respectfully, lovingly grapple with the cost of its own transformation. I don't think the outcome could have been more perfect, for everyone in the room was united in the fact that where we are is unacceptable. And how we are going to solve the challenge is a matter of faith and the personal involvement of all of us. The absence of conflict is apathy. I saw a group of spiritual friends who are anything but apathetic.

Last week Jesus told us what to do. "Train people in this way of life, mark them by baptism, and instruct them in this counter-cultural, revolutionary, sacrificial way of life and I'll be with

you as you do.” This week he tells us what it’s going to cost us. First, we’ll experience persecution. Being a faithful congregation will mean we be treated with the same disrespect as Jesus was. “If they call me “dungface” (according to Eugene Paterson’s version) then why wouldn’t they call you that?”

It will cost us the practice of the keeping of secrets and hiding God’s love under a basket. He says, “don’t hesitate to go public now. Don’t be bluffed into silence by the threats of bullies. There’s nothing they can do to your soul, your core being; save your fear for God, who holds your entire life—body and soul—in his hands. Everything will become open.” In other words: Don’t be saying one thing to one person and something else to another. Don’t protect people from their own feelings by not speaking the truth in love. There is no room in my community for bad behavior.

A little word of light in this barrage of warning: God watches every sparrow fall. Boy as I think of Capilano United Church, that will fold as a congregation in less than ten days, how is God watching over us? I hear Jesus saying “go for it. Don’t be afraid.”

Being a community of his followers will require us to be consistent. “Stand up for me against world opinion and I’ll stand up for you before my Father in heaven. If you turn tail and run, do you think I’ll cover for you?” This is a call to proclaim why we do everything we do. And if what we’re doing is not consistent with what we’re called to do, Jesus is pretty unequivocal.

And then the really high cost, the subtle cost, the one that calls us beyond the tribal behavior of our congregational story, the cost that calls us into our own self differentiation, setting us apart from our history, from the way we’ve always done things. “Don’t think I’ve come to make life cozy. I’ve come to cut—make a sharp knife-cut between son and father, daughter and mother, bride and mother-in-law—cut through these cozy domestic arrangements and free you for God.”

Remember, Jesus is sending his Lynn Valley United Church to be in the world to serve in his name; to be his representative in the community where he could not go. When I made the move from Osoyoos United to Trinity United in Vernon, Dad’s Christmas letter simply said I had a new assignment. Dad was never able to talk to me about my call to ministry. He didn’t ever ask me what compelled me to give up every weekend for the rest of my life and to pursue a life that would put a ceiling on my earning ability. I’m sure he saw no opportunity for “advancement.”

And while I continued to love my dad and respect his life and we always got along pretty well, his life story of sales and marketing and promotion strategies no longer had anything to say to what was happening to me in my own spiritual transformation.

Being a community of Christ's followers, being the ones who say yes to serving a cup of cold water in his name comes with the cost of our life. We have each other to hold onto and to support as we accept these costs as the natural consequence of following more deeply the Christ of faith. It's hugely risky for there are no guarantees that we will look and feel anything like our old selves. May that be so for the healing of the world!  
Amen.