

## The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***Cross-Eyed Bears and Considered Commitments***

*Isaiah 55.6-9; Luke 14.25-33*

Russ Dean, September 30, 2007



I learned something as I was studying this week. It's amazing how often that happens! A "mondegreen" is a mishearing of a phrase or musical lyric. Columnist John Carrol of the San Francisco Chronicle has a web page dedicated to the cataloguing of such gaffs.<sup>1</sup> For instance, he puts the line "there's a bad moon on the rise" from that Creedence Clearwater Revival tune, near the top of his list, because it is frequently misheard as, "there's a bathroom on the right." Also high on his list is the Jimi Hendrix lyric, "excuse me while I kiss the sky," for its "excuse me while I kiss this guy." His list is wonderful, recalling many common mondegreens, and some fun childhood memories – for how many among of us have not sung praise on a candlelit Christmas Eve, a silent night of our childish innocence, to that= Christmas saint, "Round John Virgin"? And how many learn to pledge allegiance "to the republic for Richard Stans..."? (Was he the first President?) Years ago, long before I knew it was a mondegreen, I learned to mis-sing that beautiful old Lancashire hymn, "Lead on, on Kinky Turtle." I do hope the "King Eternal," will not hold me responsible!

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<sup>1</sup> From John Carrol's website: On Mondegreens: ...the word Mondegreen, meaning a mishearing of a popular phrase or song lyric, was coined by the writer Sylvia Wright. As a child she had heard the Scottish ballad "The Bonny Earl of Murray" and had believed that one stanza went like this: "Ye Highlands and Ye Lowlands / Oh where hae you been? / They hae slay the Earl of Murray, / And Lady Mondegreen." Poor Lady Mondegreen, thought Sylvia Wright. A tragic heroine dying with her liege; how poetic. When it turned out, some years later, that what they had actually done was slay the Earl of Murray and lay him on the green, Wright was so distraught by the sudden disappearance of her heroine that she memorialized her with a neologism. (<http://sfgate.com/columnists/carroll/mondegreens.shtml>)

But number one on Carrol's list, which he has compiled from hundreds of listener responses, is the misquotation of a hymn composed in 1894 by the prolific, blind hymnist, Fanny Crosby. The hymn, "Keep Thou my Way," has these words in its third stanza,

Keep Thou my all, O Lord, hide my life in Thine;  
O let Thy sacred light over my pathway shine;  
Kept by Thy tender care, gladly the cross I'll bear;  
Hear Thou and grant my prayer, hide my life in Thine.

I am afraid there is a deep truth, a telling insight to our humorous mishearing: "Kept by thy tender care, 'Gladly,' the Cross-Eyed bear..." When the Way of Jesus becomes apparent... When we hear his call to "*hate father and mother, wife and children...*" (Luke 14.26) When we finally understand the radical demand of his discipleship: "*give up all your possessions,*" (Luke 18.22) and follow me to your own death... maybe there is some kind of Freudian reaction that causes the fearful child, the lazy adult, the uncommitted disciple in most of us to prefer the care of a large and lovable stuffed animal, with cute little deformed eyes and a cheery little name, "Gladly." When Jesus calls, the Church has mostly, all too gladly, misheard his demand.

And I suppose we might as well mis-hear his call to cross-bearing, and make it cozy, for so few in our midst have any idea what that call really means. Alan Culpepper reckons it this way in his commentary:

"The language of cross bearing has been corrupted by overuse. Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships. It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ. Cross bearing requires deliberate sacrifice and exposure to risk and ridicule in order to follow Jesus. This commitment is not just to a way of life, however. It is a commitment to a person. A disciple follows another person and learns a new way of life."<sup>2</sup>

The world needs followers of Jesus. I am still convinced of it, or I would not be standing here today. His Way, no less today than when that small band of friends first received it, is a life-

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, "Luke," p.293.

changing, life-giving Way. But the Church, even this church which I love dearly, yes even Park Road Baptist Church whose actions I can angrily defend when you are accused of not responding to the poor and dispossessed... the Church, the Rock on whom Jesus would build his Church (Matthew 16.18), long ago became the protectorate of an Institution, called “Christianity,” and that Institution has chosen, deliberately at times, to turn from real cross bearing to a cozier, easier, more convenient commitment. Such a watered down discipleship does nothing to change this world. Such a watered down discipleship cannot even affect the salvation of your soul which too many now misunderstand as the point of it all.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew the radical demand of the Gospel of Jesus. The German born pastor and scholar was one of the twentieth century’s leading young theologians. He had a promising academic career, a successful family, and a beautiful fiancé. And then Adolf Hitler changed our history. Bonhoeffer was a pacifist – which was no easier a thing to be then than it is now. He believed the life of Jesus called his followers to a “*more excellent way*” (1 Corinthians 13) of living – and dying. He believed Jesus’ life, and Jesus’ death, called all who would follow to a life of equally costly love, demanding discipleship, considered commitment. But his understanding ran up against a monstrous challenge in the Nazi ideology. Exhausting all other possibilities, Bonhoeffer and a few, equally committed followers, made the racking decision that assassination was the only way out.

The decision was made and a plan devised, yet through it all, Bonhoeffer’s commitments were not changed. His understanding of Jesus’ life led him to approach that assassination attempt not with bravado and a newfound theology to support it, but with deep sadness and regret. His biographer, Al Staggs, says he viewed his decision, though deemed a necessary evil, an action that was still “under the judgment of God.” Killing people – even tyrants – is not the Way of

Jesus. The decision cost Bonhoeffer his internal peace, and the failed attempt on Hitler's life cost him his own life. Bonhoeffer was subsequently arrested and, just days before the allied forces liberated the prison camp which was his final home, Bonhoeffer went to the gallows.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew Jesus' Way. He knew, all too personally, that it was a way of Passion and Conflict and Freedom and Humility. Bonhoeffer knew, and he knew that the Church, universal, had sold out. The Church, far from calling its members to the discipleship of Jesus was offering an easy way out – cheap grace. It was a way that said, if you believe a certain set of doctrines in your head... you can have grace. Doctrinal "orthodoxy" has always held great power over people, but Bonhoeffer knew that Jesus called us not just to right thinking, but to a commitment that is commensurate with that thinking.

Bonhoeffer knew Jesus' way was a Way of Prudence: "exercising good judgment or common sense..." As I first read this text, it seemed to me to be about "exercising good judgment." *For which among you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost...* Good judgment is necessary for Jesus' Way. But the second entry in my Webster's dictionary casts doubt on such prudence: "careful in regard to one's own interests..." Is Jesus' Way a way that is "careful in regard to one's own interests?"

I think not. But, after all, is it the prudence of Webster, or the prudence of God which we seek? *For my thoughts are not your thoughts... nor are your ways my ways...* (Isaiah 55.8). Perhaps the novelist Flannery O'Connor says it as well as it can be stated: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." Jesus' prudence is an odd way of exercising judgment and regarding one's own interest – but it is, finally, the only way which leads to life.

Bonhoeffer said the Church is suffering from centuries of offering cheap grace, that is, "grace without discipleship." So what does real, costly discipleship look like today? Here? Let

me say in no uncertain terms, that I believe it means the same thing today as it meant when he first uttered the words. It means a willingness to give all. A commitment to consider the costs – and to respond, anyway. It means being willing to die for that which we believe. The true Way of Jesus is, I believe, no less radical today than it has ever been.

Jesus did not call you just to a faithful “Christian” program of Bible reading, worship attendance, and giving to Park Road Baptist Church. Let me not overstate the case I am about to make. Jesus calls you, still, to so much more than that. But, because we live in a land which offers the freedom of worship, wherever, whenever, and because of our abundant standard of living, most of us, realistically, will never face the life-or-death call of discipleship. And few who live in such a place voluntarily choose to renounce what they enjoy. We live in a place and time which allows us to call ourselves by his name, without ever having to first, sit down and really “count the cost.” It is a hypocrisy which is a constant source of conflict for a Baptist pastor who wants to be faithful. Am I really a follower or not? In what regard have I taken up my cross? I certainly haven’t given all of my possessions.

Jesus calls us to a radical way of life. The very least we can do, then, is to engage in a community of believers and doubters who can agree to struggle, together, with our failed discipleship, and to offer the best we can even amid our acknowledged hypocrisy. As a part of that community, we should agree to count the cost. But may I be so bold today as to say that many of you have, apparently, not done so? When I look at the financial numbers that come out of Tom Applegate’s office, I feel more than a bit like the fellow who did not first sit down to estimate the cost before building. *All who see it will begin to ridicule him...* Did we count the cost? Did you? Apparently, we have too many members who have not estimated the cost of providing programs for our own children, and ministries to the community, who have not

estimated the cost of paying the power bill and maintaining the grounds, as well as providing for a renovated sanctuary in Carlos Rojas, Cuba, who have not estimated the cost of being part of such a wonderful, nurturing, out-reaching community of faith. Jesus may well be calling you to sell your home and your cars and to give it all to build a new women's shelter in this community – but until you, and I are willing to take our commitment that seriously, can we at least agree just to count the cost here?

Years ago an old blue-collar manager told me, “You get what you inspect, and not what you expect.” I am afraid we have not even made the expectations of this community clear. You know we don't do any inspections. When the pastors of this congregation give more in a year than 10% of the total collected from our diaconate – that is, all 36 of you – someone is not counting the cost. Will we be ridiculed for the staff we have called, the programs we have developed, the facilities we have inherited and are extending, or will we be able to finish?

Though the advertisement is probably apocryphal and not historical, it bears repeating because of the courage of those who answered whatever ad Ernest Shackelford did run in the newspaper before exploring the continent of Antarctica. The Church – this church no less than any – needs to learn from its message:

"Men [and women] wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of winter. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success."

Have you counted the cost of being a member of a community such as ours?

William Sloane Coffin says, “What finally counts is not what biblical texts or church doctrines tell us we *may* believe, but what humanity, reason, justice, and Christ's love tell us we

*ought* to believe.” For the sake of little Braden Beecher Smith,<sup>3</sup> we ought to believe in the Way of Jesus. And we ought to believe that a place like Park Road Baptist Church can be instrumental in helping us learn of that Way – and walking together in our failures. Any lesser commitment wouldn’t be prudent.

May it be so!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Braden was dedicated in a “Parent/Child Dedication” at the first of today’s service.

<sup>4</sup> This sermon was, obviously, not the “feel good” type. I had an email the following week from a woman who was struggling with it, and finding that it left her pretty unsatisfied. I am grateful for the critique. This is part of my response: “I think your feeling is obviously very natural. I was trying to deal with my own admission of struggle and feeling of hypocrisy, and the truth is that I really don’t know how to deal with this. (Maybe it’s not a good thing to be working this out from the pulpit! In all seriousness, I have wondered how much of my theology, which values questions over easy answers, leaves people in the pew feeling too uncertain. I have no doubt this is why fundamentalist preachers are so popular...) I have, perhaps it’s my own SBC background, always dealt with my share of guilt over not really following Jesus’ call. It was helpful for me to hear [from your email] the idea of Mary Oliver... about “several lives worth living.” I’m obviously not living that radical, “take up your cross and follow” kind of life. I hope I’m being faithful in my own way... and I trust that I am. I do have moments of clarity and confidence about this... but there is also that feeling that to convince myself that my comfortable life is also a life “worth living” -- in light of the demands of the gospel -- is the biggest of rationalizations, available to me, only because of my comfortable life.

What I was trying to do [in this sermon], comes out of what I have called a “theology of reality.” I talked about this a good bit when we moved here. It’s my “honesty theology.” Let’s don’t beat around the bush, let’s don’t use all those righteous words, let’s make our theology really resonate with the lives we live, the reality that we experience. The only way I know to do that with such a radical call, is to acknowledge:

1) Jesus’ call really was that radical. I think the comfortable need to be afflicted, and reminded of the radical nature of Jesus’ call.

2) What’s left??? Is it a cop-out to say, the best we can do, or the least we can do is to be faithful where we are? Maybe if we can learn to “count the cost” in worship and service, in financially supporting a local congregation, God can work through that to open our hearts to the next step...