

**Message: “A Wilderness Experience I”, Week One of “A Wilderness Experience Series”, presented by Reverend Kristen Lowe on 06-04-2017 at Crossroads United Methodist Church, Waunakee, WI.**

Say: This scripture reminds us that we are to love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind and with all our strength.

**Deuteronomy 6:5-9**

Love God, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you; love him with all you've got!

Write these commandments that I've given you today on your hearts. Get them inside of you and then get them inside your children. Talk about them wherever you are, sitting at home or walking in the street; talk about them from the time you get up in the morning to when you fall into bed at night. Tie them on your hands and foreheads as a reminder; inscribe them on the doorposts of your homes and on your city gates.

Say: Let us remember the price he paid for us and remember that his love for us is unfailing. Amen.

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The following are actual responses from comment cards given to the staff members at Bridger Wilderness Area in 1996:

Trails need to be reconstructed. Please avoid building trails that go uphill.

Too many bugs and leeches and spiders and spider webs. Please spray the wilderness to rid the areas of these pests.

Please pave the trails...chair lifts need to be in some places so that we can get to wonderful views without having to hike to them.

The coyotes made too much noise last night and kept me awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals.

A small deer came into my camp and stole my jar of pickles. Is there a way I can get reimbursed? Please call...

Escalators would help on steep uphill sections.

A MacDonald's would be nice at the trailhead.

Too many rocks in the mountains.

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These comments and complaints indicate that the people who made them do not really understand what it means to stay in a “Wilderness Area.” They were looking for something convenient and comfortable, but not truly a wilderness experience.

In a similar way, some of us today do not understand what it means to be a Christian... A true disciple of Jesus Christ... to have that fire that burns so deep within us that others can see it too.



As Christians, we may go to church, have a profession of faith, read our bibles, pray, even give in the offering, but are we the real deal or at least living and thinking like the real deal? Jesus makes it very, very clear what it means to be a Christian. And some of this may be hard to face.

Let's talk about disciples verses Christians. The term "disciple" occurs 269 times in the New Testament, while the term "Christian" only occurs 3 times. In the Book of Acts we're told that "the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch." This clarifies that the terms are interchangeable. And this punctuates the seriousness of what Jesus was saying. For instance, Jesus' words in verse 27, "anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" could also be phrased as "anybody who does not carry his or her cross and follow me cannot be a Christian." That phrasing somehow gets our attention more.

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As the scripture continues, the first thing to notice is that Jesus is speaking specifically to the “large crowds” who were following him. Jesus was not talking to those who were uninterested in his life and message. These were people who were “traveling with the Jesus.” And according to what Jesus tells them, they apparently mistook their positive attitude and interest in Jesus for true discipleship, as many do today.



The people he spoke to were willing and even anxious to follow Jesus -- providing the cost wasn't too high or the demands too great. They were like many today who look to Jesus to solve their money problems, relationship problems or health problems but quickly grow disillusioned when following Jesus doesn't solve these problems or following Jesus requires making some tough life choices. Jesus wasn't interested in numbers. Large crowds didn't impress him but what he wanted was totally committed people. Jesus doesn't want crowds, he wants commitment! Jesus is asking, “Where is the passion? Jesus wants to start a fire in our souls that will burn with conviction.”

The scripture is hard to hear and even harder to put any sense to.

“Anyone who comes to me and does not hate his father, mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life cannot be my disciple.” How does this work with love one another?

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Now the word "hate" here is not meant to be taken literally, but is rather used figuratively to express a point. In Jewish culture the word "hate" was used to express lesser love, so Jesus is saying that we must love him much more than we love our closest family relationships or even our own lives. We must love him more than our hobbies, more than our goals in life, more than our careers, and more than our self interest. We must have a burning passion for Christ that surpasses all else.

Jesus is not speaking of our emotional feelings toward him or our families, but rather he is speaking of our level of commitment. If following Jesus means forfeiting these things, are we willing to do that?

In other words, Jesus must be first in our priorities and loyalties.

For instance, if following Jesus obediently results in problems or interferes with your closest relationships, will you still follow him? This is a realistic question. In some countries right now, following Jesus can sometimes mean being kicked out of the family, losing your children, even imprisonment and death.

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This is Petr Jasek. According to a VOM update, Jasek has been released from prison in Sudan, following a pardon issued by Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir. Petr was arrested by the Islamic Sudanese regime after visiting Sudanese Christians and providing a small gift to help with a man’s medical treatment. He was convicted of multiple “crimes” last month, including espionage and entering Sudan illegally. He was sentenced to life in prison for espionage. He was imprisoned with two other pastors for spreading Christianity.

We must not only love or be committed to Jesus more than to our loved ones, but we must also be committed to him above “even our own lives.” Meaning of course our physical lives...when it comes to our spiritual lives... he’s got our back.

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There is a commercial that has run on TV recently that has a man sitting in the chair at a tattoo parlor expressing his love to Donna by getting her name tattooed on his arm. Halfway through the procedure he asks how much it will cost – \$50.00. He pulls out his cash, and says, “Oh, I only have \$41.” Cut to the couple on the sidewalk, Donna storming off, with the guy yelling after her, “I’ll get it fixed.” Zoom into the tattoo, which reads, “I love Don!”

This commercial shows the foolishness of considering the cost of something halfway through. Jesus wants us ask ourselves, “Am I in this for the long haul?”

To be a disciple of Jesus you must be committed to him above everything else.

These kinds of things, moral compromise and half-hearted commitment, would not be happening if people really understood what was required of disciples and had considered the cost as Jesus instructed.

What is your burning passion? What is the fire within you that other people see and want to be part of? What is it that excites you to discipline and commitment?

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Leadership Magazine once ran a cartoon that showed a church building with a billboard in front that said: “The lite church: 24% fewer commitments, home of the 2.5% tithe, 5-minute sermons, 20-minute worship service; we have only 8 commandments—your choice. We use just 3 spiritual laws and have an 800 year millennium. Everything you’ve wanted in a church ... and less!”

The question we need ask ourselves is not “Am I **able** to follow Jesus completely?”, but rather “Am I **willing** to follow Jesus completely?”



It may mean roughing it. It may mean we leave behind some of our creature comforts. How far into the wilderness are we willing to go for Christ? When things get rough, will we fall off?

I would ask today that you pray deeply about what it means to truly walk this wilderness experience.

Amen.