

Jesus' words today are pretty hard to hear. In our gospel reading from Luke, Jesus seems to be saying that unless we're prepared to do some pretty bold stuff, bold and risky stuff, we can't, actually, be his disciples. We might love the idea of being disciples and think that Jesus and his teachings are really great, we might really want to be disciples, but unless we're actually ready to live it, with all that will come with discipleship, he seems to be telling us that's not what we will be.

Jesus' words, on the surface, are harsh, and can feel quite defeating. Surely we're good people, good Christians, we're doing our best in a tough and a demanding world. Surely Jesus doesn't really want us to hate our families, break relationships, or live in such a way that we risk losing our livelihoods, or our lives, surely he doesn't need us to give up everything we've worked so hard for. Right?!

At this point in my life, I'm well aware of the weight of competing pressures that shape the way I live, that influence my decisions and my choices – there are powers at work that press on me, powers and forces that are economic, familial, social, civic, psychological and emotional. All of them jostling for attention and consideration. The days when I actually felt free enough and determined enough to live in a way entirely consistent with my values, those days are long past.

As a teenager and young adult, I experienced the world very differently to the way I do now. I had almost tunnel-vision about what was right and what was wrong, I had a massive amount of energy to push back against and resist the broken world as it was, I truly believed I could be part of something, a movement, that could usher in positive and lasting change, make the world better.

I was ready to risk for what I believed in, for what I felt was properly worth it. Any big, likely consequences felt different then, they didn't loom over me the way they do now.

... and the adults in my life pushed back, they put pressure on me to conform, I'm sure they were trying to protect me. I was told over and over I didn't really understand the world yet, I was being idealistic, unrealistic. "You'll think differently," they always said, once you're paying your own bills, paying your own rent, once you're an adult.

And they were right. Once I hit my mid-twenties, compromise became habitual, compromising my values started to feel necessary. Slowly I became like them, like the world I lived in. I started to doubt the viability of my utopian ideals, and get "realistic," to be being taken seriously really did require me to re-prioritize all those things I was once so passionate about ... and slowly I became risk-averse, just like all the older adults in my life. And I became afraid, afraid of what would happen if I stuck my neck out, afraid of the consequences, eventually I realized I'd become afraid of what my life would become if I chose to live fully, if I went on resisting the established ways of the world to make that happen.

What a tragedy. I'm guessing I'm not alone. How many of us, I wonder, have experienced something like this in our own life story?

I've long believed that young people, teenagers, and young adults should be taken seriously as role models for discipleship. And yet, still today, their beliefs and their desires for the world are all too often disregarded and belittled as unrealistic and impractical. Following Jesus is, absolutely, unrealistic and impractical!

Rather than taking young people's response to the world as it is seriously, we repeat the generational experience so many of us, I'm sure, had, and we become the ones who tamper down, who course correct, who 'educate' young people about the 'real world' they've yet to really get to know.

The 'grown up' tendency/habit to shoot down the beliefs of young people really is tragic, because there's a tremendous openness to the teenage mind, an ability to look for possibility and consider alternatives, and, there's what seems like an instinct to push back against established wisdom and to challenge everything. Young folks are exceptional and, sometimes exemplary, risk-takers.<sup>1</sup> Young people are the group most likely to question and to resist or even want to reject it all! The teenage experience I remember, and the one I'm witnessing with my own kids, is one full of critique of the ways things are, and there's energy for pointing out how much better things could be if the world were something they could play a role in shaping.

And blended with all this, is the inescapable reality of *really* feeling things at this life-stage; there's genuine passion behind the beliefs of young people, their commitments, their readiness to act, they have vision and they have courage. Being a young person is a heady and sometimes volatile cocktail of resistance, possibility, and passion that's all stirred up and held together with what I think is awe-inspiring courage, particularly because it's a time of life when it's really hard to hide from the question "who am I?"<sup>2</sup> and "what kind of life do I want, for myself and for the world?"

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aeon.co/ideas/why-the-brains-of-teenagers-excel-at-taking-risks>

<sup>2</sup> <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/adolescent-health/adolescent-development>

Young people really are, in my opinion, role models for discipleship. If there ever were a group who could viscerally understand why it might be absolutely necessary to hate your family, walk away, if necessary, from the life you know in order to follow Jesus, in order to be a disciple, young people are the ones who would in their bones know why that might be necessary. And if there ever were a group who might actually have the courage to do whatever it takes to pursue the truth they perceive so clearly, whatever the consequences, it is perhaps teenagers, and young adults.

It's a time of life when possibility can be instinctively and effortlessly larger than fear.

I think this kind of commitment, this passionate commitment, this gloriously idealistic and infuriatingly stubborn teenager-esque commitment to what's right and what's purposeful, the commitment and motivation to create better ways of being in the world, I think this is what Jesus is calling us into. Discipleship will surely be risky, because there's a lot at stake, being a disciple of Jesus insists on love and freedom and justice, and fullness of life for all people at all costs, and without compromise. And that's just not the way of the world we live in.

And so if we can't be like the young people, or like the people who still live and act like young people, if we can no longer draw out the younger version of our own selves, we can, at least get out of their way.

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We can recognize and uplift and support those who are on the path, who are taking the risks, our actions and our choices can make their way easier. We can help lift up their commitment for change, their creativity, and the real possibility of a different way of living, we can keep this all alive by refusing to “get sensible,” refusing to instill the fears and risk aversion we grew into in another generation.

Risk takes on a different feel with age. We might now push it away, and, we might also grieve how many opportunities for real, substantive change have been glossed over in attempt to dodge risk, and how much harm has been done by conforming our lives to a culture that’s entirely risk-averse, that delights when the pace of cultural change is slow and super-cautious, that delays justice and peace out of respect for the status quo.

Being a disciple of Jesus is not an identity to be taken lightly, and we must choose our role models carefully, and we must be open and willing to learn from all those we meet along the way, without prejudice, and regardless of what stage of life they’re in.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>3</sup> .. and perhaps, this is why. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:3 NRSVue