

COUNTING THE COST

Luke 14:25-35

First Presbyterian Church of Georgetown, Texas

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Luke 14:25-33

²⁵Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. ²⁷Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³²If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

One of the most used books in my library is a book by New Testament scholar F.F. Bruce titled *The Hard Sayings of Jesus*. He takes Jesus’ most difficult sayings, 70 of them in all, and spends a few pages seeking to explain each one in turn.

F.F. Bruce writes in the introduction: “Many of those who listened to Jesus during his public ministry found some of his sayings ‘hard’, and said so. Many of those who read his sayings today, or hear them read in church, also find them hard, but do not always think it fitting to say so. It is all too easy to believe in a Jesus who is largely a construction of our own imagination – an inoffensive person whom no one would really trouble to crucify. But the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offence right and left. Even his loyal followers found him, at times, thoroughly disconcerting. He upset all established notions of religious propriety. He spoke of God in terms of intimacy which sounded like blasphemy...Jesus did not go about mouthing pious platitudes; had he done so, he would not have made as many enemies as he did. ‘The common people heard him gladly’, we are told – more gladly, at any rate, than members of the religious establishment did – but even among the common people many were disillusioned when he turned out not to be the kind of leader they hoped he would be” (*The Hard Sayings of Jesus* F.F. Bruce pp. 15-17).

The Hard Sayings of Jesus. Some of Jesus’ sayings, we have to admit, are harder than others. And today’s scripture is a doozy. Luke 14 is the gospel reading from the common lectionary today which means that churches of many denominations in Georgetown and across the country will be struggling with it this morning. One of the advantages of staying close to the lectionary is that it calls pastors and churches to directly face scriptures that we would just as soon avoid. I imagine that you don’t want to hear these hard words today especially on a

holiday weekend. And I don't particularly relish the idea of preaching about them. I certainly could pick an easier scripture but that's the challenge before us.

These sayings of Jesus are about the journey, the journey of the Christian life. There is great joy in the journey and to be honest great cost. Most of us find great joy and meaning in the Christian life. There are also significant costs. Being a Christian should affect our loyalties, our perspectives, and our basic orientation to life because we have chosen to have a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is this Jesus this morning who speaks to us about the cost of the journey of discipleship in these verses from Luke. Notice in verse 25 that large crowds are following him now. The crowd is enthusiastic, ready to follow him wherever he may go. Jesus asks them and us to reconsider, to count the cost of what it will really take to complete the journey. He wanted to be honest in laying out the cost of discipleship. It's important to know this up front.

These words are for those who embrace an "easy believism." You know, Jesus offers you peace, happiness, joy with no cost. There are many in the church today who want to make it so easy, so simple, who offer cheap grace. Many ply their trade on the airways but even in a congregation like ours, there are those who wish to excise these hard words out of the gospels. Jesus can speak about abundant life, we think, but not about the true cost of discipleship.

Here again those words about the cost in verses 26-27: *"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."* Those are staggering words intended to stagger.

One thing you have to say about Jesus- he sure doesn't sugar-coat it. The church may at times but he doesn't. People shouldn't come into the church under false pretenses. Jesus is strikingly honest, far more than any church or Session or pastor ever is- when he says to be a Christian requires a high, radical commitment.

"Clearly this passage cries out for interpretation. Although (our study) may take a little of the bite out of these words, in what follows we should not lose sight of the radical nature of Luke 14. In the end, a stubbornly hard kernel of truth remains. Those who bite into the gospel thinking it is so much sugar and meringue will crack a tooth on this particular gospel kernel" (*Lectionary Commentary Gospel Readings* p. 404).

Jesus only hints at what the cost actually is in these verses but there is enough here to begin. Jesus says that he is more important than family ties. Let me explain though the use of his word "hate." That's a strong word both then and now but when Jesus used it, it did not connote the strong emotion that we associate with hating. "To hate" here is a Semitic expression meaning "to turn away from", "to detach oneself from." To hate in this context then is to disentangle ourselves from important commitments that are less than the ultimate commitment.

In many Old Testament passages the word “hate” is used to convey a lesser form of love. Hate is not some wild-eyed, loathing fury but as a lesser, secondary attachment. The Gospel of Matthew conveys this nuance through his version of this saying: “Whoever loves his family more than me cannot be my disciple”.

“The call to hate simply means to “love less”. The image is strong, but it is not a call to be insensitive or to leave all feeling behind. This pursuit is to have priority over any family member and one’s own life, which means that other concerns are to take second place to following Jesus” (Darrell L. Bock *Luke 9:51-24:53* pp. 1284-1285).

If this nuance of “hate” is correct, then it helps to explain how Jesus could say something about a disciple’s family which is at variance with the law of God as well as with other sayings of Jesus himself. After all, Jesus frequently upheld the marriage relationship and challenged those who showed a lack of respect for parents. There is Jesus’ own example of caring for family members and loving the children” (*Lectionary Commentary Gospel Readings* p. 404-405).

Even understood this way though, this call to ultimate loyalty is still one of the very hard sayings of Jesus. There are times when our culture and the church today worships the family. Jesus’ words calls into question one of our highest priorities to ask about our ultimate loyalty. Jesus takes precedence over family, self, money, our desire for success.

Plainly stated, Jesus says he must come first. What an amazing claim! Think what the people who knew him then must of thought when he spoke these words. They were scandalous. Absolutely presumptuous. Arrogant! Who is this guy? Who does he think he is? That’s exactly the point of Christianity.

The passage asks- how much do you really, truly esteem this Jesus? He describes what some of those costs look like. Then he asks us “have you counted the cost?” Are you sure you want to follow me?”

He speaks two parables that are fairly straightforward. The first parable comes from the world of private agriculture. The farmer who builds a tower. In a fully equipped vineyard a tower was an essential piece of equipment. People would keep watch from the tower for thieves who tried to rob the vineyard or for foraging animals. As a village carpenter, Jesus may very well have built some of these towers and seen first hand the experience of farmers who did not have the resources to complete their tower. Those farmers were considered fools in their time.

The second parable takes place at the royal house where battle strategy is being planned. In that time, a king who had 10,000 troops will try to cut his losses before going to war against 20,000. As we fight wars as a country, we are well aware of this kind of strategizing. This estimating is critical for the overall strategy of any nation.

What Jesus calls us to in these two parables is for some careful thinking, probing, and weighing when it comes to the Christian life. In a word Jesus says: Think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way. Are you sure you want to follow me?

This reminds me of what we do at weddings. Weddings begin with an opening statement on the theology of marriage and a prayer for the couple. Then there is what is called the Declarations of Intent. This is not the marriage vows which come later in the service. We ask couples to declare their intent: "Having heard how God has created, ordered, and blessed the covenant of marriage, do you affirm your desire and intention to enter this covenant?" The bride and groom respond "I do". I often tell couples that the Declarations of Intent are really asking "Do you really, truly want to get married? Are you sure? In other words, have you counted the cost for this important commitment in your life?"

Jesus is asking us to declare our intent about the Christian life. To count the cost. To think again about what Christ calls us to be and do.

Which brings us to the question- why is counting the cost so important? Why does Jesus value this so highly? I think the answer is because so many do not finish their Christian journey. There are many who never consider what it really is going to take to complete the trip.

From time to time, I look over the lists of those who have joined our church over the years. I rejoice at all those who have found a church home here. But I also note many who have not remained. They attended a New Member class or seminar. We asked them to declare their intent when they joined: "Will you be a faithful member of this congregation, share in its worship and ministry through your prayers and gifts, your study and service, and so fulfill your calling to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" They began well, some with great enthusiasm, but they didn't remain. They stopping worshipping with us, some were never assimilated, some never found a place to use their gifts, they struggled with their health. There are some who went to another church but I'm not talking about that group. I'm referring to those who simply stopped participating in the church here or anywhere.

This concerns me, greatly. More importantly, it concerns Jesus. He is concerned about those who don't finish. The Christian life is not a 100 meter dash or even a mile run. The Christian life is a marathon. The Christian life is not like a quick trip to Austin and back. The Christian life is like a cross-country road trip.

Sometimes we don't estimate very well. Sometimes we run out of gas. Sometimes we're living on fumes, so to speak. The concern of Jesus behind these parables is that everyone will finish the journey. Hang in there. Pace yourself. We want you to finish. Christ wants you to finish. Consider carefully the cost.

In counting the cost of Christian discipleship, we need to also consider carefully the cost of the alternatives. If we decide not to make the Christian commitment and go do something else, what will we be giving up? There is cost involved there too.

Could you walk away from all this? Give it all up? I don't mean this place but the life. Some could, perhaps. Personally, I find too much value in the community of God's people. I find too much fulfillment in the worship of God. I find too much meaning in the Christian life. I love the thinking we do about the most important matters of life.

Let's hear once again from F.F. Bruce: "It is all too easy to believe in a Jesus who is largely a construction of our own imagination – an inoffensive person whom no one would really trouble to crucify. But the Jesus whom we meet in the Gospels, far from being an inoffensive person, gave offence right and left....But in those who were not put off by him he created a passionate love and allegiance which death could not destroy. They knew that in him they had found the way of acceptance, peace of conscience, life that was life indeed. More than that: in him they came to know God in a new way; here was the life of God being lived out in a real human life" (pp. 16-17).

No Christian writer balances the joy and the cost involved in the journey as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He has the last word today:

"Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ... (Costly) grace is *costly* because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs people their lives, and it is grace because it gives people the only true life" (*The Cost of Discipleship* p. 47).