

No Price Too High 09/08/2013

Luke 14:25-33

Now 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.

27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28 For 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? 29

Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

31 Or 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? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

## LARGE CROWDS

Jesus had become very popular. Large crowds were traveling with him.

The popularity of Jesus is easy to understand. Jesus had healed many people. He had fed 5,000 with only five loaves and two small fish. He suggested that in God’s kingdom the poor and broken of the world would be lifted up by the grace of God.

This was good news. This was news that the people longed to hear. And so large crowds followed him.

In our lesson last week, Jesus was eating at a Pharisee’s home. This was an exclusive affair. Only religious and political leaders were invited to this party. The people at this meal were so sure of their own importance that they argued over who should have the seats of honor, the best seat in the house.

But, Jesus had a word for these movers and shakers. The guest list in God's kingdom would be a lot longer than they imagined. And it would include those broken by life: the blind, the crippled and the poor.

In fact at that meal those broken ones would have the seats of honor.

The broken people loved the message of Jesus. And there were a lot of them.

So, Jesus was popular. Large crowds followed him. Finally someone was standing up for the common person.

Jesus was telling them what they wanted to hear. He was healing their diseases. He was feeding them. The kingdom of God was like a free lunch for those who were hungry. Right?

## THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

Well, not quite.

Jesus turned to this crowd that had come for the healing, the free meal, and the political revolution, and he threw a money wrench into their dreams.

Instead of talking about a party and all the goodies they would get in the kingdom, Jesus began to talk about discipleship. Jesus said to the crowd,

“If you're going to follow me, you better learn to count the cost.”

Cost? Jesus I didn't think this was going to cost anything. Who has a party and charges the guests? Doesn't grace mean that everything is free?

Well, maybe not.

Grace is not cheap. Grace comes at a high cost. For Jesus the price will be very high indeed. If you're going to follow Jesus, be warned. He's on the way to Jerusalem. He's on the way to the cross.

And those who follow Jesus will also be required to take up a cross.

Anything worthwhile comes with a high price tag. And before we begin any significant undertaking we need to consider the cost.

Are we are willing to pay the price? Are we willing to do what is necessary in order to get the job done?

### THE DRYER VENT BUILDING

On the far side of Orlando there is a building that soars over all the rest. Carrollyn and I call it the dryer vent building because that's what it looks like. It looks like one of those pipes on the roof that vent the hot air out of your dryer.

Now, not only does this building look odd, it is also incomplete. It has been half built for a long time now, a monument to a builder who didn't count the cost. His neighbors and the newspaper have subjected him to much scorn.

And Jesus was telling the crowd,

“If you don't consider the cost of being my disciple, you're like that man who didn't count the cost of building a tower. You'll be subject to the ridicule of your neighbors. Your insincerity will become apparent to all.”

### KINGDOM PRIORITIES

According to Jesus, the Kingdom of God is about finding the pearl of great price. (Matthew 13:46) Jesus is indeed the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

And that means everything else in our life has to take second place.

Jesus warned the religious leaders about their sense of self-importance and legalistic ways. But, Jesus also warned the crowds about the danger of reducing the kingdom of God to a free lunch. God is doing something bigger than just meeting our needs.

Following Jesus is more important than even the most important relationships in our life. That's what Jesus meant when he told the crowds that they had to “hate” their family members if they were going to follow him.

Obviously this is hyperbole, an exaggeration meant to grab the attention of his listeners.

When we come across a biblical passage that is hard to interpret, the first thing we do is look at other passages in the Bible that are clearer. There are many passages will that help us understand this passage in a broader context. Thank goodness this is not the only thing Jesus said about family life.

For example the fifth commandment tells us to honor our father and mother. And Jesus once roundly criticized the religious leaders for using a technicality to get out of obeying that commandment. (Mark 7:9-13)

In the parable of the prodigal son Jesus even compared the love of God to the love of a father.

Certainly Jesus is not talking about hate as we use that word. This was an expression used in Jesus' day that meant to "turn away from."

The gist of what Jesus is trying to say is perhaps better expressed in Matthew's gospel. In Matthew 10:37-38 we read,

"Whoever loves father or mother *more than me* is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter *more than me* is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

In other words if God was in Christ, then following Jesus is more important than anything else in life. It's a matter of priority.

It's no accident that the first of the Ten Commandments is to love God above all else. Even our family obligations have to take a back seat to following Jesus.

This absolutely happened with those first disciples. They once told Jesus, "We've left everything to follow you. We've left our family to follow you. We've left our jobs to follow you."

And Jesus acknowledged that this was true. But then he reminded them that now they had a new family, a larger family based upon a common faith and a common purpose.

Family is important. But, we must resist the temptation to make our family into a false god.

Maybe Jesus used such strong language in this passage because he saw the potential for a big problem. Often the desires of the family are used as an excuse to avoid the cost of discipleship, the cost of following Jesus.

## THE HARD TRUTH

Jesus loved people enough to tell them a truth that was hard to hear. Following him would not be easy.

Earlier in the summer we read that passage where Jesus told the people that the birds of the air have nest for a home and the foxes have a lair, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.

Jesus tells us,

“Think twice about vowing to be my disciple. It won’t be easy.” (Luke 9:58)

The early Christian community also emphasized the cost of discipleship.

Paul said that he had been “crucified with Christ.” By that he meant that he had given up or crucified the old way of life in order to live the life of faith. His body was a living sacrifice to the Lord. (Galatians 2:20 and Romans 12:1)

I think this notion of sacrificial discipleship has been downplayed or even ignored by the modern church. Unlike Jesus we are afraid to mention this hard truth.

But, this is a central theme of the New Testament.

In all the gospels Jesus tells his disciples and anyone who listen that following him involves a cross. Following him involves sacrifice.

What is this sacrifice that we are called to make?

What is this cross that we are to bear in the name of Jesus?

## THE CROSS OF PEACEMAKING

Two things come to mind. First, the cross of Jesus is the cross of peacemaking and forgiveness.

Many in the crowd thought Jesus would lead a military revolution against the Romans. That's how they viewed the role of the Messiah. This was a common interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures at that time.

They believed that they were God's chosen people and therefore God was on their side in the time of battle. In their view it was only a matter of time before the kingdom would come.

And that kingdom would be a political kingdom. The Promised Land would once again be under the control of God's people.

But, when Jesus was on trial before Pilate he told the Roman ruler that his Kingdom was not of this world. Jesus rebuffed his disciple's effort to defend him and said that those who live by the sword die by the sword.

You can see this emphasis in Jesus' second example of what it means to count the cost of discipleship. If a king wants to wage war and has ten thousand troops, but his enemy has twenty thousand troops maybe it would be best not to engage in war. Maybe it would be best to try a diplomatic solution and ask for peace. In this case the cost of war is too high.

But peace has a very high price as well. Peacemakers do not bow down to the powers that be. Instead peacemakers confront the powers that be with the truth, God's truth.

When Jesus met the violence of the religious and political authorities with nonviolence, he was crucified. But, his crucifixion was not in vain. The cross became in God's hands an instrument of forgiveness and eternal hope.

The cost of following Jesus for us means finding the courage to be peacemakers in a violent world. We seek reconciliation based upon truth, justice, forgiveness and grace.

That is a costly path.

But, that is the path that Jesus took.

And that is part of what it means to take up a cross and follow Jesus.

## CRUCIFYING MATERIALISM

But, taking up a cross and following Jesus has a second emphasis. It is the rejection of materialism. In verse 33 Jesus said, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Again this sounds like an impossible command. How can we give up all our possessions?

I think it is a matter of stewardship. Everything we have is a gift from God. Our family relationships, our money ... you name it. It all comes from God.

Therefore, the cost of following Jesus is to give up everything, even our own life if it comes to that. We live not by what we can get on our own. We live by the hand of God’s Providence.

The apostle Paul once said that he knew what it was to have plenty, and he knew what it was to be in want. But, over the course of his life he had learned to be satisfied in both situations because he trusted that God would give him what he needed when he needed it. (Philippians 4:11-12)

Those who follow Jesus see power and money for what they are: idols, false gods that lead us astray. The cost of following Jesus is to give up our addiction to these idols and to trust instead in the grace of God.

This means that we see the world through radically different eyes, the eyes of faith. And that makes a difference in how we live.

## THE BIBLICAL JESUS

A couple weeks ago I read about a new book. It’s a book about Jesus called the Zealot. The author is a scholar who is a Muslim. And he portrays Jesus as a political revolutionary.

He says that we can’t know much about Jesus. But, he thinks that Jesus was basically a military Messiah figure.

So, he discounts all of the New Testament except those very few passages where Jesus seems to be advocating a political revolution. For example, in Matthew 10:34 Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

By the way, this is what always happens when you think that the Bible is not reliable.

In this case, Jesus looks a lot like a small version of Mohammed. If the life of Jesus is evaluated by a liberal college professor, Jesus looks a lot like a liberal college professor. If the life of Jesus is evaluated by a Communist, Jesus looks like a Communist.

But, if we want to follow Jesus, we must do just that.

We must follow. We must make our lives conform to the life of Christ and not the other way around.

We cannot replace the cross with a video screen and theater seating. We cannot replace the call to give up everything and follow Jesus with prosperity “theology” that suggests that God wants us rich.

Now don't misunderstand.

I think that following Jesus is rewarding. He is the way, the truth and the life. (John 14:6) He is the road to abundant life. (John 10:10)

But, ironically that abundance does not come through seeking our own good. In the Kingdom the first will be last, and the last will be first. (Mark 10:31) In the Kingdom those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will find their life. (Mark 8:35)

## THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

There's a reason that I think this is true. The early Christian community lived by these principles. When you look at the life of the early Christian community, did they start any political revolutions? Did they lead any armed conflicts?

No. Even when they were persecuted by the powers that be, they chose martyrdom over conflict.

And they had a whole new perspective on money and family. Slaves and masters, men and women shared leadership in the church. People gave up important family relationships in order to join the church.

They shared their lives and they shared their possessions not out of compulsion but out of love. And the world took notice. (Acts 3:46)

These were the people who wrote the gospels. They were the earliest witnesses to how God was in Christ.

This witness was terribly distorted, first by the Roman government and then by other political powers down through history.

### THE YOKE IS EASY

But, if we want to follow Jesus, the biblical account keeps us on track. If we want to follow Jesus we joyfully give up everything, because we know that the journey does not end at the cross.

The cross is empty. We are a people formed by the power of the resurrection, and the hope of eternity.

So, yes discipleship is costly. And each of us who want to follow Jesus should definitely count the cost.

But, Jesus also said that his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. (Matthew 11:29-30)

There is a freedom to following Jesus. When we let go of everything our hands are open to receive the blessings that come from above.

Come follow Jesus. Give up everything and find life eternal.

Amen.