



MINISTER
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING
KIM JOHNSON

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 9, 2007

Luke 14:25-33

Counting the Cost

Intro: Our New Testament lesson comes from Luke. Our reading follows a familiar story, the parable of the wedding banquet, where people offered all kinds of excuses for not coming to a party. In these verses, Jesus urges us not to act on impulse but to think through our decision to follow him. Let us listen.

Sometimes I wish Jesus would not be quite so provocative. He often comes across as demanding more than I'm able to give, and that makes me uncomfortable. It seems today that he expects more than we want to offer. And the timing of this text is not so good, either. Here we are, on Fall kick-off Sunday, full of excitement and music, Sunday School, cinnamon rolls - high spirits all around, and we get stuck with a text that makes us squirm in our seats. Sometimes I think whoever chooses these assigned Sunday scripture lessons must have a strange sense of humor.

All across the country preachers are welcoming children and families back to church and at the same time having to explain away today's alarming words from Jesus. Was Jesus serious when he said, according to Luke, to a large crowd one day,

“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?” I know Greek word studies never make the life of a party, but it is good to know that “hate” is misero, and it does not carry a sense of anger or hostility, but rather is an indication of priority. If a choice has to be made between discipleship or family loyalty or discipleship and possessions Jesus' followers must be prepared to let their attachments go.

Jesus stares that large crowd in the face and tells them that to follow him will require great sacrifice on their part, that it's not going to be easy. The crowd most likely started to dwindle as he spoke. They were beginning to count the cost of throwing in their lot with Jesus. So should we. In the Gospels we get the distinct notion that Jesus

would be more pleased with 50 dedicated disciples who understand what commitment to him and his cause means, than with 5000 lackluster Christians who are just along for the ride, to enjoy the scenery. I remember back in seminary when graduating seniors were all looking for first calls, we'd be anxiously reading any job posting we could lay our hands on. One of the open position descriptions began by stating boldly, about the minister they were seeking, “We are looking for a happy Christian because we are happy Christians”. No one I knew was happy to apply.

Discipleship, following Jesus, is not simply a matter of being happy, or nice, or good-natured. As Douglas John Hall has written, we are Christians, not because we are (or think we are) good, or right, or just, or “concerned”—and certainly not because we are “nice”—though hopefully we are “as decent as ordinary people.” We are Christians because we believe in God as God is made known in Jesus Christ through the divine Spirit and the testimony of Scripture.

Christian faith is not merely American middle-class values with a slight overlay of religious language. If we have reduced our discipleship in the way of Jesus to embracing American values and morality, then our faith is effectively dead and gone, and we might as well take our marbles and go.

What we do here, Sunday after Sunday, generation after generation, is not about affirming some gospel of self-fulfillment.

Christian faith is much more than that. It's about putting God first in our lives, putting God at the center of our lives, and it begins, as Jesus tries dramatically to indicate to those listening in that large crowd, it begins with sacrifice, with risk, with deliberately stepping out of line with the expectations of the world around us.

In this text Jesus sounds like a preacher working up a rhythm. He says, Whoever comes to me and does not...cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not...cannot be my disciple. You cannot be my disciple if you do not. It's a common theme in Luke: discipleship requires detachment from the things of this world, and total commitment to the life of the realm of Jesus. We cannot be followers of Jesus if we are not willing to let go of that which makes us feel secure. Jesus poses to us a foundational question about our loyalties, about where we put our trust, ultimately. Who, or more likely what, comes first in our lives? If our response to that question is, honestly, something other than God, Jesus wants us to see that we've missed the mark. Nothing, not even those closest to us, nothing should hold our greatest faithfulness, other than God. The rest we have to let go of. It is not culturally or politically correct to say it, but Christianity demands sacrifice, expects interdependence, and requires relinquishment. Otherwise the cross means nothing to us. To “take up our cross and bear it,” as one writer notes, has nothing to do with chronic illness, painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships, (my uncle Clyde was described as a cross to bear). It is instead what we do voluntarily

as a consequence of our commitment to Jesus Christ.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer last century who helped us understand the cost of discipleship. In the book by that same title, he spoke eloquently of the demands on those who would follow Jesus. This German pastor who resisted Nazi ideology because of his Christian conviction, to the point of giving his life in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler, wrote,

“If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity, as one of the trials and tribulations of life. We have then forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering.” To be Christian in our time, we will have to leave off our obsession with independence and success and individual achievement, according to the standards of the world around us. Discipleship calls for a re-orientation of our lives. One who follows Jesus is not an isolated heroic unit, reveling in his or her freedom and self-determination. On the contrary, he or she is acutely aware of the Other, whether that Other is God or neighbor, even enemy, and aware of the unremitting mandate to love the Other.

While Bonhoeffer and other martyrs through history and even today face life-or-death decisions in their discipleship, most of us

will find ourselves having to mark our Christian commitment in smaller, less extraordinary steps. Christine Pohl writes, It might be easier if we could count the cost once, make the necessary sacrifice and get it over with. But the costs of discipleship are often ongoing, and faithfulness requires a tenacity that does not give up in the face of trouble and understands sacrifice in a larger picture that is richly life-affirming...Usually the way of faithfulness involves laying down our lives in little pieces, through small decisions and unremarkable acts of...generosity.

Letting go of our families, our parents, our children, our siblings, and then taking them up again in a new way; letting go of our friends, even our enemies, and then taking them up in a completely new way; letting go of whatever gives us security, and discovering a new and never-ending source of hope and purpose – that’s what Jesus is preaching to his followers, then and now. Whatever has become like god in our lives, when we let go of it by putting God first, our world is turned upside down, and we can begin to see what God was up to in Jesus of Nazareth. What once seemed of ultimate importance to us in our lives becomes of little consequence, when we put God first.

The remarkable thing about the Divine Being we encounter in the Bible is that God, while managing to be the sovereign Creator of all that is, simultaneously puts us first. The psalm this morning is a hymn to the intimacy in which our God holds us. Somehow God has crept so close to us, and made us, each one of us, so central in the

divine consciousness, that the psalmist can say O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. (Ps. 139:1-4) When we can approximate such profound trust in a God who knows and loves us with such intensity, then we can begin to put God first in our lives.

I have always envied the abandon with which the disciples, who were really quite ordinary people, like us, take up their obedience when Jesus invites them to follow him. I suspect that they were able to leave their nets, their livelihoods, their families, their homes, and go with Jesus because they experienced God as having chosen them first. That allowed them to choose God back. We love because God first loved us. We creatures put God first because God puts the Creation first. As we start up our church program year, it turns out that Luke’s text about the difficult demands of discipleship is perfectly appropriate, however challenging those demands might be. As we begin anew the cycle of education, nurture, faith in action, worship, seeking justice, we had better look at what the cost will be, for Jesus is after our very lives, the whole of ourselves. Let us count the costs, and put God first. Always. Amen..