

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

TEXT: Luke 14:25-33

Yikes! Our reading from Luke certainly lays it on the line. It's all or nothing. Really, Jesus? Really? C'mon...hate my relatives, carry the cross, and give up all of my possessions? Surely, you don't want this passage to be taken literally. You can't mean what you say here. As the writer of Luke brings us these words from Jesus, I shudder a bit. Am I able to meet these criteria in order to be a disciple?

I know this is a scary passage. It is a difficult and demanding message, but it has so much to offer. Because in this part of the story, Jesus asks his disciples, both then and now, to sacrifice. Actually, he doesn't ask. He tells us that he expects, even demands, undivided loyalty (and it's where the hyperbolic language of hating comes in). This is why we're asked to count the cost – because Christian life is expensive, it demands our commitment in terms of our time, attention, and money. Now, let me be clear, I'm *not* talking about salvation. That's done, over, finished and completed by God's grace alone. So we need to move on. Can we talk not only about justification but also discipleship? Because that's what Jesus is talking about here, the cost of discipleship.

I believe everyone who seeks to be a disciple of Jesus has to weigh the cost – and decide if it is worth it. We do need to wrestle with the cost of discipleship. Granted most of us will not be called upon to give our lives for the sake of the gospel ala Dietrich Bonhoeffer or Martin Luther King, Jr., but we must consider the cost and decide whether we would be willing to do so.

What about hating one's family? Does that mean we might have to choose between our family and following Jesus? Maybe. Are we willing to disagree with our parents, spouse, or children when it comes to discipleship?

How do we address Jesus' directive about possessions? This is a tough one. Western culture teaches us to value stuff...often to the detriment of relationships. We

live with the concept of “retail therapy” as an antidote to almost everything. And here we have Jesus telling us to give it all up.

Oh, but what does it mean to carry your cross? We need to remember that at this point in the Gospel, the cross hasn't happened yet. Calvary is yet to come. Carrying the cross at this juncture has to be in the context of what has come before, not cast in the hindsight of our theology, confessions and traditions. It could mean to carry the burdens of those from whom Jesus releases burdens. It could mean to carry the ministry of Jesus forward by seeing those whom the world overlooks. It could mean favoring and regarding the marginalized, even when that action might lead to our own oppression. It could mean that whenever and wherever we see the needs of others today, we take them upon ourselves.

Yes, this is a difficult teaching, but a central one to the life of discipleship. Nothing – nothing at all – must come between us and our relationship with Jesus. Nothing should stand in the way of following his command to love God with everything we have and our neighbor as ourselves – not money, not stuff, not politics, and not family values. Following Jesus is a way of life that demands everything of us.

And we are about to begin a journey that will test us. It will test our ability to work together as a group of disciples – yes, a little band of believers – to continue to bring God's love and care to the people of our church and our community. We are going to embark on a journey of self-administration as a Lay-Led Congregation. This is not a new concept for the United Methodist Church. As small churches find it harder and harder to support even part-time professional ministry, laity have been stepping forward to manage the church “business” and maintain their necessary presence in the community. Our neighboring United Methodist Church in Aberdeen did this very successfully, on short notice, with no opportunity to formalize any training. We have nearly ten months to bring this new venture to reality.

If you haven't yet picked up a copy of the proposed outline for learning, be sure to do so at the back of the sanctuary. Give thought and prayer to where you are most comfortable in the new order. We will soon begin bringing groups together around the responsibility areas and get going. And you know, it is not as difficult as it may look. I realized that when I arrived in Hoquiam six and a half years ago, I had to learn all of those functions on my own. And, fumbling more than a little bit, I did it. You can too.

So, here we are, about to learn first-hand the cost of discipleship. Yep. Discipleship did not end with the original twelve – or probably more accurately eleven. Perhaps we should give some thought to that twelfth fellow. The other eleven carried on pretty well without him. The cost for us is a little bit of time and a little bit of learning. The rewards will be a more vital church. You will no longer “just go to church”. You truly will *be* the church.

So here's my question: Is there really a cost to discipleship? Or is it a choice? When it's all about cost, it's all about what you give up. What you sacrifice. What you deny. When faith is cast as cost, we tend to forget the fact that life itself is costly, not just faith. Life is full of choices, of counting the costs, weighing the costs. The cross is not unique, but representative of what life is. To carry your cross is to carry the choices and burdens and realities of a life that has made a certain commitment – a commitment to a way of life that is committed to bringing about the Kingdom of God here and now. That's certainly what it meant for Jesus.

Your commitment means that your time and your talents will be called into play. The ministries and the programs of the church will depend on each one giving prayerful thought to where they fit best in the overall mission of the church. God calls us to commit our time, our talent and our treasure to this mission.

Yes, today's lesson is a difficult teaching, but a central one to the life of discipleship. And, here's the kicker. We each don't do it alone. Even though we may want to follow Jesus, to be willing to give up everything, it is virtually impossible to do.

We can try, but we will likely fail. So instead of giving up and saying that the cost is too high or discipleship is impossible and therefore its irrelevant, remember that it is the grace and love of Jesus that enables us to keep on going, to keep on trying, and to keep on believing that faithful discipleship is the way.

So, let's open the conversation and allow ourselves to wrestle openly and honestly with what it means for us to carry the cross, hate the ones we love, and give up all our stuff, then maybe, just maybe, we can admit that although there will be failures along the way, we will lean on Jesus to guide our steps. It will mean taking some huge risks; it will mean expecting more of ourselves and others, and it will involve sacrifice. So, what do we have to lose? So much depends on how each one of us answers that question.