

**Counting the Cost**  
Luke 14:25-33  
September 4, 2022  
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I suppose it's only natural to present the Christian faith as some sort of answer to our questions. It's a primitive but sometimes effective technique to help you obtain whatever you think you must have to make your life more fulfilling and livable.

Do you have doubts? Come to a safe place to share your doubts and have your questions respected. Anxious? Fearful of the future? Come to our church! Our pastor is preaching a six-week sermon series on healing your anxieties. Lonely? You'll find that we are the friendliest church in town.

Well, that's just a sampling of some of the church banners, signs, and advertisements I've seen in our city over the years. I'm sure they hope to attract folks to their church with these appeals. And all of them are somewhat true, but only up to a point.

No doubt some of you can testify this morning that sometimes you have had your doubts ministered through the church and sometimes you've had your questions answered. And who doesn't want to be part of a church with rich fellowship and friendliness. But when all is said and done, none of this--friendliness, peace, hospitality, community--none of this is the chief reason for the church.

The church is the body of Christ in motion. The visible, earthly, human, institutional embodiment of Christ. His presence in the world. His body belongs to him, not to us. And the words he speaks and are not always the words we long to hear.

If Jesus is the purpose of the church that means that we are gathered here today by the one who said the words we heard just moments ago from Luke's gospel. Do they cause you to wince? They do for me. "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."

What was Jesus thinking? Put those words on a banner, post them outside our church, how many visitors do you think we'll attract for next Sunday? 'Come to our church, join us, in dissing your parents, and despising your family.' Can you imagine?

Now great crowds are clamoring after Jesus. He's become popular. I wonder if Jesus senses that the crowd has grown because people have misunderstood him. They may have confused Jesus' way with some of the other conventional, popular paths within the world.

Many people in that time and place expected a messiah, the anointed One, who would come in and raise an army, and get rid of those despised, repressive Romans overlords. Set up a kingdom like David's and put Israel back on top.

But Jesus was not the Messiah they expected. Rather than speaking words criticizing the oppressive Romans, Jesus saves his most biting comments for his own people, particularly targeting his own disciples. So, Jesus verbally assaults the crowd with a stinger of a sermon, which is our text this morning. He tells them that being his disciple is a costly affair. Following him could turn your beloved family against you and require a break from those whom you love.

How stupid it would be for a king to go to war without counting the cost of the battle. How dumb it would be for someone to begin building a tower, and not calculate how much stone would be required to finish the job. Count the cost, Jesus urges. Be real sure that you really want to walk the way I'm walking.

I'm sure there were some who said, "I didn't know following Jesus would be this expensive," or "I'm here to find peace and tranquility, not to cause conflict with the people I love. Or...wait a minute...doesn't scripture say to love and obey your parents...it's one of the Ten Commandments! Who is this, that presumes to circumvent the holy scriptures?"

Maybe I'm being too critical of Jesus' demanding words this morning, and maybe I'm not being fair to you. Sure, there are probably those of you who are offended by Jesus' words. But perhaps there are some of you who have had it with false prophets. You've had it with churches that pander to your most selfish inclinations. And maybe, though you don't know everything about Jesus, you do know enough to know that he is the truth in a world of falsehoods and false messiahs, and you know that following the one who is the way, the truth and the life will not always be smooth sailing.

And most of all, perhaps of all the things you are searching for in life, you're searching for an adventure, a mission, bigger than you, a purpose to give to your life that will test you and call forth the very best of you. Jesus' way is his way. Not our ways. His truth is uniquely demanding unlike the many truths we give ourselves. But this way, this truth leads to life.

So, what I have characterized as the abrasive bad news of Jesus' harsh, impossible demands, you hear him giving you a gracious invitation to sign up for discipleship. To take up the cross and follow him down a narrow, demanding, but adventuresome way that few want to go.

I'll admit that these words about turning against our family, the sacrifice, the risk, the danger, I'll admit these may be hard to take. I'll admit these may not be the words that you were hoping for or thought you needed when you came to church this morning.

Yet, I note an irony here. Jesus spoke these words midway in the Gospel of Luke. He spoke these words to crowds of people tagging along after him. He also spoke to them openly before his disciples. And you would expect Luke to start saying, 'the crowds got smaller, and his disciples were whittled down to one or two. That's what you would expect Luke to say.

But that's not what Luke says. Luke continues his story, and Jesus' disciples continue with him up the road towards Jerusalem and almost certain death. No false advertising with Jesus. None of this empty reassurance. He tells them up front about the cost of following him. He promises them not a cushion but a cross. He urges them to count the cost before they launch out into the world.

I confess that as a preacher, I could do a better job of honestly presenting to you the cost of discipleship, the demands of following Jesus. Too often I'm tempted to present Jesus as "the answer" to all your problems, a really nice person to make your life easier and to make nice Presbyterians even nicer. Some of you can testify that Jesus was not the end of your problems. Jesus is the beginning of problems you never had before you met Jesus.

But the thing I want you to note most of all, that still, they followed. Despite the tough words, the demanding sermons, they followed. This does not mean that his disciples did not disappoint him along the way, which doesn't mean they fully understood everything he had to say. Or really knew what he was up to. And where the journey would end. Still, they followed. It doesn't mean they would always be steadfast in their commitment. We'll hear about that in the rest of the story in Luke. It doesn't mean that they never had doubts about Jesus' mission. Still, they followed.

And so have you! You may not know everything you'd like to know about the Bible, or the Christian faith. You may have doubts. You may have fears, particularly after hearing Jesus' words today. But still, you follow. You've come out of the crowd, and you've come here to

Westminster to listen to Jesus on a holiday weekend preach a sermon in Luke you did not want to hear. You stuck with Jesus, even when his words stuck you, and challenged you. You haven't gotten up and stormed out.

You'll go home, count the cost, be honest about the dangers, and then, you'll be back next Sunday still following Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.