

## The Cost of Discipleship

A sermon for September 4, 2016

Luke 14:25-33

[Lansdowne UMC](#)

Tomorrow is Labor Day. A lot of people are taking a 3-day weekend before the full Fall schedule erupts on the scene. Yes, indeed, the slower paced days of summer are coming to a close. So, as your new pastor, it seems fitting that there be a nice, gentle word for us this morning. Something to encourage and strengthen all of us as the activities of school and church are about to get into full swing.

I've gotta confess though-- I was so preoccupied with thinking about all of the activities that are starting up at church that I... uh... I didn't get a chance to do much sermon preparation. And then just now-- gosh, this is embarrassing-- I forgot to pay attention to the Gospel reading. It's ok though, because Jesus is always so comforting, isn't he? Maybe if you don't mind, I'll just, uh, open up to it here and catch myself up on the encouraging message that it has for us today.

What book was that? What chapter was it again? 14? Ok. Verse, uh, 25? I gotta be honest. I'm not really too familiar with this one, so I'll just preach as I go along.

Ok, here we go. "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus!"

Ok, my brothers and sisters. You know Jesus started out with just a few followers. But now he's apparently got a lot. It looks like Jesus was

finally becoming a truly successful preacher-- because successful preachers have large followings, right?

We want crowds to come to our church, don't we? I bet this is the part where Jesus tells us the key is to rapid church growth. Let's continue on... I think he's about to let us in on the secret.

“Whoever comes to me and doesn't hate father and mother, spouse and children, and brothers and sisters—yes, even one's own life—cannot be my disciple.”

\*nervous laughter\*

Oh... uh, wow. That went downhill fast, didn't it. Who picked this scripture? Well, I guess we can't go anywhere but up from here, can we? He's probably just about to talk about how to successfully grow a church. Something that'll really bring people in droves. Let's continue and hope for the best.

“Whoever doesn't carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Oh come on! Hate your family, carry your own execution device. This is not at all what I wanted to hear. Maybe if we just skip down to the end... where did we end? I don't know, maybe he'll sugarcoat this a little bit.. Let's try out verse 33...:

“none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Ok, that's it! I'm done!

Wow! Well, thanks for indulging me in being a little bit ridiculous. But, wow, this really is a difficult word this morning, isn't it? It's actually hard to imagine a denser collection of what some have referred to as "the hard sayings" of Jesus-- as if there were actually any easy ones.

And as people trying to interpret scripture, we really want to soften Jesus' message. We want to give it what Biblical scholar N. T. Wright calls the "salt water" treatment: first you water it down, and then you take it with a grain of salt.

But why would Jesus say these things?

For the past several months we've been following Jesus' journey to Jerusalem as it's told in Luke's Gospel. It's in Jerusalem where Jesus will eventually be abandoned by all his followers and endure a painful death. When Jesus gets there, it won't be long before the scripture is fulfilled that says, "Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered" (Zec 13:7).

And yet Jesus is followed by *crowds*. Why in the world would crowds follow him?

Well, it's not hard to imagine that the crowds were amazed by the deeds of power that Jesus did-- healing people, casting out evil spirits, raising the dead.

And so it would seem that as Jesus himself considers the crowds of people who seem to want to become his disciples, he understands what

has in fact happened. In hearing the good news about the kingdom of God, the crowds have missed the cost, which is the cross.

And so does he soften the stumbling blocks on the road for these would-be followers? No, he paints them bright orange and points them out from a distance. “See that?” he says, “That is what you’re going to encounter if you follow me.”

Jesus’ mission to bring and embody the reign of God on earth means living out God’s will with complete self-giving abandon. You cannot have the kingdom without the cross.

Being a disciple of Jesus demands everything that we have and everything that we are. And complete and total obedience to the will of God means that all other concerns shrink infinitely in their relative importance. It’s Jesus first, or Jesus not at all. And if Jesus is first, then the path of the disciple is the path to the cross. It’s an existence that is so caught up in love of God and love of neighbor that it always leads to a life completely poured out.

And so Jesus highlights the big threats to discipleship: possessions, a desire for self-preservation, and even attachment to family itself. Because if these things are our first priority-- if they are Lord-- then that means Jesus is not Lord.

\*phew!\* This stuff isn’t for the faint hearted, is it? But that’s exactly Jesus’ point. Being a disciple of Jesus is not easy. It means confronting every loyalty and hope that we have and removing anything that comes before Jesus.

The scripture does not say how many gave up being his disciples that day. But whatever Jesus' precise goal was with these difficult words, we can certainly say that Jesus' primary goal is not the number of his disciples, but the commitment of his disciples.

Jesus does not want anyone just to wander into discipleship unawares. There's no bait and switch here. This is what you're getting. Are you sure you want it?

It's as if Jesus says to his disciples, "are you really, truly willing to make me your master? Because perhaps you need to rethink what you're doing. You need to think about what this is going to mean for you. You need to understand the cost of discipleship."

It's not always obvious to us as Christians in America that following Christ costs anything. Despite the major declines in church attendance over the past several decades, over 75% of Americans still identify themselves as Christians.<sup>1</sup> And so identifying as Christian is, well, normal. It's going with the crowd.

But countless examples throughout the nearly 2,000 years of Christianity could be lifted up to illustrate the cost of discipleship.

In 1933, nearly 6 years before the outbreak of the second world war, the German church aligned itself with the Nazi party's nationalistic and protectionist agendas. At the time, a man named Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and professor of theology. Together with many faithful Christians in Germany, he found that his allegiance to Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/video/180305/trend-line-three-quarters-americans-christian.aspx>

conflicted with allegiance to the government of his county, and indeed with much of the German church.

Because of his priority to follow Jesus rather than the government, he was forbidden by the Nazis to teach and banned from the city of Berlin. In 1937, he wrote a book entitled “The Cost of Discipleship,” in which he condemns the “cheap grace” that the church so often peddles-- forgiveness without discipleship; justification of the sin without justification of the sinner; the kingdom without the cross.

When war broke out in 1939, Bonhoeffer was in America on a lecture tour, but Christ called him away from the safety of the states back to Germany-- back to the plight of his people. He ended up working with a German resistance movement as it tried to contact and coordinate with allied forces. In 1943 he was arrested and sent to a concentration camp. In 1945, he was hanged, just two weeks before his camp was liberated by allied forces.

Being a disciple of Jesus costs something. I doubt that Bonhoeffer knew exactly *how* his discipleship would cost him. What I don't doubt, however, is that he knew that it was costly.

So who in the world signs up for this? Who makes a decision to pick up their cross and follow Jesus?

I believe it is those who trust in Jesus' word-- those who believe in the central paradox of the Christian faith that Jesus articulated in Luke chapter 9: “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

The more that we strive to live for our own comfort and satisfaction rather than to live wholeheartedly for God, the more we find that our life is lacking. “There must be more,” we say. We want the Kingdom without the cross. But the way to the Kingdom is nothing less than the way of the cross.

I know that people sometimes like to look at the trials of their lives and say, “well I guess that’s just my cross to bear.” But Jesus never *places* a cross on us. As disciples we look at the world and we see so many ways to serve our God and our neighbor. But they all require sacrifice. Which cross has your name on it?

When we make the decision to pick up the cross, we learn the truth of Jesus’ paradoxical words. When we pick up the cross in love and in faith, we find these words of Jesus to be true: “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” When we hitch ourselves up with Jesus and lift the load, the life and strength of Jesus come into us. We find that it is not our own strength that carries the load, but the strength of Jesus. We find that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We find that we actually can carry the cross. And as we carry the cross, we find ourselves to be citizens of the kingdom of God-- children of God.

Will you be shaped and molded by the cross? Will you pick it up and be a disciple of Jesus?

Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus forgive us for ever thinking that being a Christian requires nothing of us. You carried your cross for our sake. Shape and mold our hearts so that we can carry ours with faith and in obedience to your word. For we ask it in your name. Amen.