

September 9, 1007
15th Sunday After Pentecost

“Counting the Cost”

Luke 14:25-35

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Sermon

We count the cost of things a lot, don't we? I just bought a house. That means a whole bunch of bankers and loan officers looked at my income and assets, then counted the cost of a mortgagee and figured I could afford it. Now I'm in the process of getting a handle on my monthly bills, counting the cost, and hoping desperately that those financial experts were right.

We don't make big financial decisions lightly. We examine them first. We look at what we might have to sacrifice and weigh it against the benefit of the purchase. And much of the time the wisdom of the purchase remains uncertain and causes us a great deal of stress in our decision making. Consider the parent whose teenager's chief goal in life appears to be collecting music-like recordings on their iPod, text-messaging the entire planet about mismatching Capri pants with hiking footwear or becoming the supreme master of the Halo III video game. They get this anxious and distant stare as they calculate the cost of putting that kid through college.

Major purchases, career changes, vacation destinations, how to use our leisure time, who we spend our time with—we often spend a lot of time consternating over such decisions. And rightly so; such choices can have a huge effect on our life. But do we give the same type of consideration to the cost of following Christ? Maybe not, because if we did we probably wouldn't like the looks of the price tag.

Counting the cost is exactly what Jesus is telling folks to do in today's Gospel reading. And he doesn't pull any punches about what that cost is.

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

Yes, you heard correctly. Jesus said we must hate our family and our own life if we are to follow Him. OK, it's obvious that Jesus is using hyperbole here—an exaggeration of sorts for emphasis. But "hate?" That's some real, real strong hyperbole. Jesus isn't messing around here. If you're going to follow Christ, your commitment to Him must dwarf the other commitments in your life, even your commitment to life itself.

And we don't really like that kind of cost, do we? All too often I think we take our discipleship for granted, thinking the cost is small—or at least making sure that the cost is small. We think along the lines of, "Forgiveness and eternal life? Cool, I'll take it, so long as it doesn't interfere with my life too much. It's a good deal." When actually called on to show our faith in life, to act as a disciple, the cost seems higher than we bargained for and we back off. We don't speak out against a wrong, and even if

we do, we do so on moral or logical grounds, hesitant to proclaim something as against the will of God the Father. We think that might cost us in terms of reputation. We don't want to look like one of those silly Jesus freaks.

We value our family life and good times with loved ones. How often do we let bad behavior and habits get a pass because objecting would make waves? When we have loved ones who turn their back on the faith, often we simply stop proclaiming the truth because they find it irksome and annoying. The cost of discipleship is a high one—peace in the family and strained relationships. Often we opt not to pay it.

At work, the cost of being honest and above board may be high. Often profit is made at the cost of honesty and fairness to the customer. Those who don't go along with the company line may sacrifice promotions or bonuses. Conversely, giving a solid day's work to one's employer often isn't the norm and doing so can get bring pressure from others to stop making them look bad, stop kissing up. Discipleship can cost the goodwill of coworkers.

And let's face it, Christianity isn't one of the "cool" things in pop culture. Especially among our youth, speaking and acting as a follower of Christ is going to guarantee automatic exclusion from some clicks and draw some ridicule and derision from others. Standing up for the faith can cost popularity and even some amount of social exile.

Jesus doesn't try to sugarcoat the facts. *"Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."* The cross is a symbol of shame and persecution, of being the lowest of the low. To follow Christ is to be willing to give up all that may lift you up in the eyes of men in order to serve Christ. And there is no getting around it. *"So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."* If we try to take a shortcut, to get a bargain, to be a Christian without doing what takes, **being** what it takes to follow Christ, then we're a Christian whose lost our Christ-iness. We're salt that isn't salty. *"Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."*

Man, this whole counting the cost thing is getting to sound pretty depressing, isn't it? It's really not. Not when you get down to the cost/benefit analysis. When you weigh the cost of discipleship against the alternative, well, Moses speaking God's covenant in Deuteronomy makes it pretty clear; *"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."*

Life and death, blessing and curse. That's pretty much what is laid before us too. Following Christ has its costs in this world, and they often aren't pleasant or cheap. But following Christ is following Him into His eternal kingdom. Bearing our cross may mean enduring ridicule and shame, allowing ourselves to be humiliated and humbled in the eyes of the world, but it means Christ won't be ashamed of us in eternity. Christ bore his cross to that hill outside Jerusalem, and became glorified on it as he on it was crucified, bearing the sins of all mankind. God allowed Himself to be made a mockery by mankind in order to save that same mankind He loved so much from the evil that was and is its very nature.

When we bear our cross of faith and devotion to Christ, we follow him to Calvary and join with Him not in suffering and death, but in victory over it! It is on the cross where Christ buys us back from death and the devil and frees us to follow the path of life and blessing in God. The cost of not following Christ is curse and death. C'mon, is this really a choice at all?

This is like if Lillian Benton had shown me my house over in the Mulberry subdivision and said, "You can buy this three bedroom ranch with attached garage, central air and a swimming pool, or for a real bargain price I can get you a tin box in a sunny field where it's always August with a high-powered furnace and a fireplace!"

Choose life! Choose Christ! This is a no brainer. You're here in church because the Holy Spirit has led you to faith. You know the truth. You know Christ died and rose that your sins would be forgiven. You know that Christ has gained reconciliation between we imperfect sinners and our perfect and righteous God. By calling us to faith the Holy Spirit has placed us on the same path with Christ bearing our cross on the way to victory over death. Follow Him! To choose to do anything else is ludicrous. The eternal glory of heaven is already ours! The pressures of this life, of family and friends and society which ask us to drop our crosses, to choose a less costly path, are inviting us to give up the glory and peace of God in exchange for false pleasures which gain us only death and separation from God's love.

Count the cost carefully. Weigh the options. There is no uncertainty. Choose life. Choose blessing. Choose what is costly. Choose the eternal treasure Christ bought at the cost of His precious blood.