

Message, "Why Estimate the Cost?" 9-4-16

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18

Luke 14:25-33

I remember the moment well. It was my first meeting with the Candidates Committee of Denver Presbytery. I had made my decision to spend my professional ministry years as a Presbyterian pastor. There were hoops to go through, however. My father-in-law came with me for moral support. He was an Elder and well known as a Presbyterian Medical Missionary. He offered to go with me and I certainly thought his association with me would not hurt.

Nevertheless, I was nervous and found it a bit intimidating to be before eight people all asking why I desired to go into professional ministry. They had some sport with me, asking if I knew what I was doing while painting pictures of sacrifice and challenges. The seasoned pastors projected through their own questions pastoral experiences they had not found easy and challenging, even frustrating. Whether they were trying to intimidate me or scare me I'm not sure. They did manage to make me sweat. I simply at one point just wanted to survive the occasion. My responses came across like a broken record. All that I remember saying is that the reason I want to come under care of the Presbytery is a strong sense of call from God. That really was all I knew. At that point on the journey isn't that all I needed to know?

I do recall the last question I was asked by an older pastor. "You know, you are not going to make a lot of money, don't you?" Actually, money wasn't on my mind, but it was on his mind. Maybe he was indirectly complaining about his compensation through the years, I don't know. At that time any pay check would have looked good to me though. So my response was, "Sure, I understand but I assume God would provide appropriately. Money isn't why I am making this choice". End of conversation and I was dismissed with a prayer. Eventually I was brought under care.

Just as Jesus is challenging the large crowds of people following him to estimate the cost of what that means, I'm certain that group of pastors were trying to do the same for me. They knew things from their life experience that I did not. Jesus also knows things that the crowds do not know.

Remember, the crowds are conflicted in their understanding of who Jesus is and what he is doing. He knows that his end would soon be a cross. They still have hope that he is going to overthrow Rome and make Israel great again. Worldly power and glory would not be his end, however. Maybe that is why Jesus is speaking as frankly to them as he does.

Jesus engages them with a pertinent question. "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" It is a question that echoes through the centuries. It is God's way of saying to us not to take this commitment of faith lightly.

This is true for any worthy undertaking in life. Remember the statement the pastor often says to the couple at the beginning of the marriage ceremony? "It is, therefore, not to be entered upon lightly or unadvisedly, but thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God". Right before I led the groom's party to the altar one of my groomsmen looked at me saying, "Well Chuck, it's only for life". Reality was staring

me in the face. I am not sure romantic love in the moment ponders the question of cost. That would be too much sticker shock all at once. A true understanding of the cost unfolds through the years. Deeper commitments are made in increments as we are tested along the way. Following Christ in faith is like that.

Jesus wants to grab this fickle crowd's attention. He throws them, in effect, three 100 MPH pitches. The first one goes sailing by; "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple".

Then the second pitch; "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple".

Then he hits the batter with his third pitch; "So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions". As one commentator on the passage reacts, "Where do we average 'Christians' fit in, and what are we supposed to do?" (Homiletics, p.12).

Well, if you are one of those among the crowds, what do you think? What do you say? How do you respond? What, Jesus, are you trying to tell us? What are we all thinking this morning? This is no motivational speech inviting us to ponder the path to success.

Who might be in that crowd? Would we find ourselves? There might be the revolutionary, wanting to make Jesus a social activist for his or her particular cause. How about the impulsive person offering vows of allegiance but with no follow-through? Would we find the self-seeking person ready to use Jesus for personal gain? How would we have seen and heard him in that moment? What did they want from Him? How do we view Him and what do we want from Jesus this morning?

Or would we be more like the person in Wendell Berry's poem, "The Vacation"? It is about a man who is speeding down a river on a motorboat, his video camera firmly planted in his eye while recording everything he sees. I am reminded of myself years ago as the photographer during family events and vacations. Here is how the end of the poem reads: "He showed his vacation to his camera, which pictured it, preserving it forever: the river, the trees, the sky, the light, the bow of his rushing boat behind which he stood with his camera preserving his vacation even as he was having it. With a flick of a switch, there it would be, but he would not be in it. He would never be in it" (Homiletics, Sept. Oct. 2016, p.13).

Looking over the family photos, I recall one of my kids asking, "How come you're not in any of these pictures, dad?"

Jesus wants us in His story, not as an observer catching the event on video or simply a passive participant. He wants us to be active followers who are aware of what they are signing up for. He is making sure that we understand that being His disciple is on His terms, not ours. In his "Prayers for Fellow Prisoners, Christmas, 1943", Dietrich Bonhoeffer prayed, "You have granted me many blessings, let me also accept what is hard from your hand".

Can we be a follower of Jesus without being a disciple? It would appear that He is calling us to more than church membership. All great leaders, coaches, military generals, religious, and others, have made demands of their followers. Not all are life-giving, however.

I have always trusted that Jesus knows things about us that we don't know about ourselves. Let's briefly look at these conditions of discipleship in that light.

We would all agree that loyalty is important. We can't serve both God and mammon. Remember the phrase, "You can't have your cake and eat it too"? As Jesus is facing the cross He observes affections waning. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple". That gets our attention. Jesus, didn't you take the children in your arms, bless them, and tell us that we need to be like them in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Didn't you look at your mother and tell your friend John, while in agony on the cross, "Behold, your mother"? Certainly he was not asking us to despise natural ties of family was He?

Jesus often used "trenchantly paradoxical words, especially under deep emotion". That word, 'hate', is an Aramaic word, its root meaning to 'love less'. One commentator reflected on it this way, "The word means that they were to act as if they hated loved ones whenever the claims of home came into conflict with the claims and leading of Christ. He demanded a primary and undivided allegiance" (Interpreter's Bible, vol.8, p.259).

Jesus then piles on top of that statement another; "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple". Jesus is inviting us into the suffering life of God in this world. Once prominent daytime talk show host, Phil Donahue, explains his chief objection to Christianity; "How could an all-knowing, all-loving God allow His Son to be murdered on a cross in order to redeem my sins? If God the Father is so 'all-loving', why didn't He come down and go to Calvary?" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.111).

Jesus' cross is not rational from the vantage point of human reason. However, God's ways are not our ways. The Cross becomes a sign of overcoming evil and victory over death. However the cross of Christ may assure us of the final outcome, battles still remain for us to fight. This is what it means when Jesus asks us to carry the cross and follow Him. Jesus' cross symbolizes God's identification and continued participation in human suffering. The cross is God shouting to us 'I love you, I'm with you'. If God can take the worst deed in history and turn it into victory than think of the possibilities of what can God do with our own apparent failures, struggles, and hardships? The cross is God's invitation for us to hope, and as we carry that cross and follow Jesus, we discover His sustaining presence, peace, and joy through the challenges and experiences of our particular life situations.

The last condition Jesus places on discipleship has to do with the security of money and things. "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possession". That seems awfully radical for a person who also said "Render unto Cesar the things that are Cesar's and to God the things that are God's". Even Jesus' disciples kept a treasury and had financial means to pay for the days' material needs. Judas is the overseer of that purse and we know even pilfered from it.

Here I think Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers insight. "Earthly possessions dazzle our eyes and delude us into thinking that they can provide security and freedom from anxiety. Yet all the time they are the very source of anxiety". Jesus would have us live with the deepest trust in God and simultaneously experience a reduction in our daily anxiety. He wishes to free us from those things which impede us from entering into a joyful and fruitful relationship with a loving God.

This Labor Day holiday grew out of laborer's desires to be valued beyond their jobs and to have lives beyond their work (Homiletics, p.9). We all want that and Jesus points the way. So as we gather around this Table of Communion with the Risen Christ and each other, we are challenged to right affections, deep commitments willing to go the distance, and in so doing shed all impediments along the way.

Here we receive the nourishment and strength to do just that. Where Christ calls, He provides.