

“Worth It”

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Luke 14:25-33

25 Now large crowds were traveling with [Jesus]; and he turned and said to them, 26 “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. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 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? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31 Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

It seems that Jesus is in serious need of a good public relations firm. Did you hear the first line of the gospel text we read today? Luke starts out by saying “Now large crowds were traveling with him.” I can picture the PR firm telling Jesus “*Wonderful news! You’ve got a good, solid following, Jesus. Now, you’ve got them hooked. Just keep up the miracles and excitement and the crowds will continue to grow.*” Jesus doesn’t take that advice, though. He turns and says to them “OK, listen up folks. Glad you are here. Thanks for coming out tonight. I’ve got some things I need to tell you. First, if you don’t hate your whole family and even your own life, just go ahead and

leave now. If you aren't interested in carrying a cross, head on out. Oh, and one more thing: if you don't give up all your possessions, you'll need to leave." Can't you just see the mass departure of the crowd?

What was Jesus doing? Why is he running everyone off? He answers those questions with a couple of quick stories. The first is about someone building a structure, but running out of money half-way through. The second is about a king who has to decide if he can battle against another king who has twice the troops he has. These examples are designed to tell us that there is a high cost to discipleship.

Those of you who are parents know that one of the toughest tasks is to teach your children the value of things. Children do not innately understand that all of the objects in the grocery store are not theirs for the taking. They must be taught that just having checks in the checkbook doesn't mean that there is money in the bank and that an ATM card isn't a ticket to limitless money from the bank. Everything in life has a cost and that cost must be counted, whether we are talking about a box of cereal or following Jesus.

Unfortunately, this is not the message the crowds gathered around Jesus wanted to hear. Jesus was putting on a good show with all of the miracles and they wanted that to continue. Miraculously making food in a poor culture? That's something that people want to follow. Talking about the cost? That's the wrong message. And it's not the message we want to hear, either. There is talk today about making churches "seeker-friendly." Everything in a church should be friendly and inviting. The cross? That's too depressing; take it out. The prayer of confession? Who wants to be reminded about their sins; take it out. Old hymns about dedication like "All to Jesus I surrender"? No talk about surrender; take it out. Sermons which challenge us to further commitment to God? Who has the time for commitment; take it out. Everything is offered without

cost. We want to come to church, perform our weekly hour of religious duty, and return home unchanged.

Will Willimon, former dean of the chapel at Duke University tells a story I love. Several years ago, Willimon got a call from a very upset parent. "I hold you personally responsible for this," the parent said.

"Me?" Will asked.

The father was hot, upset because his graduate-school bound daughter had just informed him that she had changed her plans ("thrown it all away" was the way the father described it) and she now was going to go do mission work with the Presbyterians in Haiti. "Isn't that absurd!" shouted the father. "A BS degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she's going to dig ditches in Haiti."

Willimon responded, "Well, I doubt that she's received much training in the Engineering Department here for that kind of work, but she's probably a fast learner and will probably get the hang of ditch-digging in a few months."

"Look," said the father, "this is no laughing matter. You are completely irresponsible to have encouraged her to do this. I hold you personally responsible," he said.

"Me?" said Willimon. "What have I done?" The father responded, "You, you ingratiated yourself with her, filled her head with all that religion stuff. She likes you, that's why she's doing this foolishness!" Willimon had heard enough: "Weren't you the one who had her baptized?" "Why yes," the father said. "And then didn't you read her Bible stories, take her to Sunday school, let her go with the Presbyterian Youth fellowship on a trip?" "Well...yes, but...." Willimon continued, "It's your fault that she believed all that stuff; that she's gone and thrown it all away on Jesus. You're the one that introduced her to Jesus, not me." The Dad said, "but all we ever wanted her to be was a Presbyterian." "Sorry," said Willimon, "you've messed up and made a disciple."

Jesus doesn't really mean that we are supposed to be disciples, does he?

It seems He does. It seems that we are supposed to even *hate* everyone around us. What is Jesus saying here? Hate your father and mother? Don't the ten commandments tell us to honor our father and mother? Shouldn't we love our neighbor as ourselves? And, doesn't the same go for our spouses and children, brothers and sisters? In the language of the day, "hate" wasn't a feeling word as much as a priority word. Jesus is speaking about priorities. The Message paraphrase says "Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters—yes, even one's own self!—can't be my disciple." The Contemporary English Version says "You cannot be my disciple, unless you love me more than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters." Fathers, mothers, spouses, children, siblings – they are all important, but none are as important as the duty we have as disciples. This really isn't Jesus saying he won't *let* us be disciples if we don't have our priorities straight. He is saying that we simply *cannot* be disciples if our priorities are out of order. It just won't work. Our first priority is to our duties as disciples.

Jesus says half-hearted disciples aren't really disciples. Elsewhere, He says "No one can serve two masters.". He tells us we need to be fully committed to Him. He wants us to be vessels for His love, able to pour out His love on a world in need. Jesus knows that when we are only partially committed to God, we will not be faithful disciples. We must surrender all.

Instead, we want it to be easy. We want everything to come without cost. We demand low prices for everything, settling for cheap goods and ignoring the cost to our society. We want religion to be cheap and easy, as well. We ignore the cost of peddling to the lowest common denominator. Jesus calls us all to ultimate sacrifice and we attempt to make do with so much less.

And yet, *sometimes* we are willing to at least recognize the cost. Sometimes we are able to open our eyes and truly see the cost of following Jesus. Sometimes we look around at what the

cheap cost has bought us and we are unsatisfied. We have more and more consumer goods, but less and less satisfaction with our lives. Perhaps we are willing to pay the cost when we know that our lives will be meaningless and empty unless we do pay that cost. Bright and talented people *do* pass on high-powered jobs to go dig ditches in Haiti. College students spend their spring breaks on service projects, rather than on the beach. People join the Peace Corps. People leave good jobs to follow Christ's call. People look around at the world and say it can be better and, with God's help, I'm going to do something about it.

Willimon says "People are hungry to give their lives to something more important than themselves. It is a fact of life, not only that everything costs us something, but that, in our better moments, we are even eager to pay the cost."

So, when Jesus gave that speech, not all of the crowd ran away. Some stayed and they passed down that heritage to us. Their descendents spread the name of Jesus when doing so could get you killed. They kept Christianity alive under totalitarian regimes and under persecution, even death. They counted the cost and decided that life spent with our savior is worth any cost that we might have to pay.

What about us? We aren't living under a government that persecutes Christians, despite what some may say.. We are free to worship God in just about any way we chose. What cost are we willing to pay? What is the cost that Jesus expects of us today? What is it that we are holding on to that we must rid ourselves of to be faithful disciples? Can we call ourselves disciples?

In the 1940s, Clarence Jordan founded the Koinonia Farm in Georgia. In the midst of poverty and racism in the South of the 1940s, Koinonia Farm was an interracial partnership in which all participants shared what they had. The fact that they were open to all races in a time of Jim Crow and the Klan meant that they often were involved in battles of a variety of types, including legal. Clarence's brother, Robert, was a lawyer who had big plans for his own future.

Clarence called on Robert to help out with their legal battles and Robert said "I can't do that. You know my political aspirations. If I represented you, I would lose everything. You see, it's different for you." Clarence responded "Why is it different? I remember that you and I joined the church on the same Sunday as boys. And I expect that when we came forward the preacher asked you the same question that he asked me, 'Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?' I said, 'Yes.' What did you say, Robert?" Robert responded "Clarence, I follow Jesus up to a point." Clarence asked, "Would that point by any chance be the cross?" Robert's response: "That's right. I follow him to the cross, but not on the cross. I am not going to get crucified." Clarence responded to his brother, "Well Robert, I don't think you're a disciple of Jesus. I think you are an admirer of Jesus."

Today, we have to decide if we are going to just be admirers of Jesus, or if we are going to be disciples of Jesus. Are we willing to pay the cost of being the disciples the world needs us to be? It won't come cheap and it won't come easy, but as Martin Luther said over four hundred years ago, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing." Let's be disciples together, grabbing hold of that which is worth everything, no matter the cost. Amen