

The Cost that Counts

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1;
Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

[Do you remember last week? All that talk about banquets, and dinner, and everybody being able to come and have a place? If you get a chance this morning or this afternoon, take out your Bible and look at the 14th chapter, and you'll see that right before this incident, there's a little story about a great person who invites people to a feast and they have all sorts of excuses not to come, but the person who's throwing the feast will not have it that his dining hall is empty and his food uneaten; and so he goes out and calls everybody into the meal. And if you remember at the end of last week's sermon I told you, sounds like a free lunch doesn't it? And I told you this week, that today we would talk about the cost of the lunch. But there's a catch to it; it's one that most people miss. The cost that we're talking about isn't something that the people who pay it feel is imposed upon them, rather the cost flows directly out of them because of the experience they've had, and they wish to respond to it. So, let's see how it goes.]

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't remember exactly when I read the book, but I do remember I was one of the youth group leaders at my local church back in New Zealand at the time. The book, some of you may have read it, was called *The Cross and the Switchblade* and it was written by David Wilkerson, an American evangelist who was dedicated to working with inner city teens. That book set my imagination on fire, and I dreamed of an opportunity to work with youth the same way Wilkerson had.

A few years later, the opportunity did actually present itself, and I began work as second in command at one of the four juvenile detention centers, this one near my city, the others in different parts of the country. I was filled with all sorts of imaginings about the great changes I would be able to make in the lives of the young men who would be in my custody. My first day on the job saw me bright eyed, bushy tailed, and ready. My first two weeks were to be on-the-job training without any real responsibilities, as I learned the ins and outs of the custodial care of incarcerated juvenile offenders. At the end of my first day I was, as we say these days, pumped! I was ready to be the incarnation of David Wilkerson in the New Zealand juvenile detention system!

I couldn't help thinking that the people in the crowd may have been something like that, the ones traipsing around after Jesus. The things that He said, the way He touched people at the very core of their being, the things He did, and the way he really lived His faith – it was very attractive to people worn down by a legalistic religious system and an occupying Roman authority.

But not everyone was enamored of Him. Some, I guess, were there because their friends or family had brought them; some were there out of sheer curiosity. But there were also those who were there getting and gathering information about His activities, which were so contrary to the religious beliefs and teachings of the time. Their purpose was to fulfill the conditions necessary to officially terminate Jesus' activities.

But then, there were those among the people crowded about Him who were ready to follow His teachings and to serve as His disciples. And you know when I think about myself and I look out at you, I think we've got to be a lot like that crowd – in different ways at different times, but just like them. I don't think any of you are taking notes so that you can have me defrocked by the new bishop. But there are times when we're here because we're curious, and I hope some of you are here because you're curious about what I said at the end last week's sermon. And at times we want to hear more about Jesus, and all of us I believe, in our own way, all of us in some shape or form, are trying, are we not, to live as His disciples. What is it we say in the Eucharistic prayer, and we'll say again this morning: "not as we ought, but as we are able."

I was certainly feeling able – more than able in fact – that first day on the job in the detention center. Not only was I convinced that I had what it took, but I was already seeing myself as a David Wilkerson. I could see how I would change the lives of the youth in custody, how I would dramatically bring them to Christ to serve Him and to be completely transformed by Him.

But as always happens when we're this way, my dream was shattered – rather rudely – when two of the team on duty grabbed hold of me and manhandled me into the lock up. They didn't say a word. They didn't explain what was going on, they just did it. They overpowered me, they dragged me into the lock up, they stripped me naked of every stitch of clothing I had on, slammed the grill shut, and left me. All that was before me was an empty room, a narrow cot with bedding, and a secure window.

For a while I couldn't believe it had happened. What had they done to me? Why? Was it some sort of crazy hazing they did to everybody on their first day? Was it some sort of stupid, practical joke? Was I arrested? Had I been imprisoned? Well, it sure looked like it. I went through a gamut of emotions. Initially I was intimidated. I was furious. I cried. I was confused. I was a twenty-three year old wreck. David Wilkerson had fled.

I began to search for a way to escape. I plotted a vicious assault on the first person who came within reach. I yelled about injustice and screamed that I was quilting, I was done with the whole . . . well, you can fill in the blanks. If this is what they wanted, if this is what it took to work in a detention center, a prison camp, a torture chamber, I wasn't going to have any part of it. It was a terrible cost and I wasn't going to pay it, but someone sure as . . . eggs . . . was going to pay when I got out of there.

I wonder if the crowd had some of those reactions when Jesus addressed them? Listen to what He says: "So you want to be my disciples, is that it?" "Then listen up." "Following me is no free ride, it's going to cost you, and it's going to cost you plenty."

What follows – you just heard me read it – is a set of demands before which even we pale even today. Hate those who love you, family and friends. Hate life itself. Oh yes, and by the way, give up all your possessions! Yeah, right, we want to reply. Give us a break!

But do you notice what's happening? Suddenly we're off with a whole string of thoughts because the language has so shocked and stunned us that we're beginning to miss what it is that Jesus is really saying. Remember, of course, Jesus isn't speaking to disciples, but to those thinking about it. He is talking to the crowd that is following Him. More specifically, He's talking to those who are contemplating becoming disciples. That doesn't make things any easier for us, does it, because in overhearing what Jesus is saying to the crowd, we can't help but evaluate our own living of our faith as Christ's disciples.

Okay, so I warned you last week, and I'll warn you again, this isn't going to be comfortable, so here's what we're going to do. With our feet firmly on the carpet, I want you all to take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. And just sit back, and relax, and let's see if we can make some sense out of this.

First, let's look at this hate stuff. I believe the people in the crowd had as much difficulty as we have when we hear the words that Jesus has to say and who and what He tells us to hate. But wait a minute! How can Jesus say, hate your father and your mother when the commandment clearly says we're to honor them? How can we hate our brothers and sisters and friends and others when Jesus Himself demands that we love them?

Something's wrong. And we have our problem when we hear the word "hate" and the dramatic way in which Jesus is using it. If you're anything like me when I hear "hate", the first things that pop into my mind are the words "I hate you" and "hate groups" and "she hates me" and the like. But is this what Luke is actually trying to tell us?

In fact, what Luke is trying to do (and it has been really poorly translated), he's trying to express a Semitic concept, an idea that people had at the time which meant something like "becoming detached from" something that was too strong an attachment or "moving away from" something, or if you like, getting something into a new priority, a different one than it was in before. And then what's being said can start to be seen as a call to establish, first of all and foremost, a relationship with Christ such that we're in a new family, the community of faith, which doesn't negate our ordinary, biological family ties but moves them into a new perspective. Jesus isn't calling us to treat our human families with anger and hostility, but simply that those who would be disciples value their relationship with Him over and above their relationship with human family and friends. It's simply a matter of getting Christ first in our lives, for when that relationship is established – wonder of wonders, it begins inform and nurture the real love we have for family and friends and neighbor and stranger.

Now, that may sound all new to you, but it isn't at all. We are proclaiming it all the time; whenever we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, we announce ourselves as "one nation UNDER GOD". Now, if that doesn't mean that God is our first priority, what does it mean? Once we have made that declaration then God, and Him in Christ Jesus, is not only the nation's first priority, but is the first priority of the genuine disciple.

That's part of the cost, this readjustment of priorities, Jesus says, that you will need to pay if you're going to be my disciple. But Jesus is not done with shocking and stunning the crowd, and I bet the crowd around Him grew even more silent and still, for the next thing He says is, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple." If the people in the crowd were stunned by his first remark, now they were deeply shocked and offended. They knew all too well what carrying the cross was all about. Crosses, with their burden of twisted, brutally executed corpses, lined the main highway. Each of those poor victims had to carry their cross to the site of their crucifixion where they were brutally nailed to it before it was raised beside the road to exhibit to one and all the excruciating and torturous death that awaited those who dared to cross convention or the authorities or the religious leaders.

Surely the crowd was horrified. Sadly for us, over the years we have so removed the cross from what it really was, we have so sanitized it that it has become divorced from its vicious, and bloody, and cruel, and deathly purpose and reality, and the terrible cost God in Christ paid on it for us, for our salvation. "Carry the cross," Jesus tells the crowd. Follow me, and accept the challenges, the risks and the sacrifices that will be required of you for the journey instead of seeking out the comfortable and easy way. Be prepared to put your life on the line.

Folks, it staggers me to see the young men and women, especially those from this congregation, who have accepted this responsibility and burden and as we speak, risk everything they are and they have in the deadly conflict in which our nation is engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan. The question for us, then, is simply this. Are we living out our commitment to Christ with the same dedication and determined self-sacrifice as these young men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan? For if we cannot, if we do not, then we are not disciples. Period.

And finally the question that strikes everyone one of us where it hurts the most, our possessions and the thing that's behind it, our purse, our wallet, our money. Jesus prefaces His command to the crowd to give up all their possessions with two short parables, each about thinking through the consequences and the costs before we act. A salutary lesson to our government and to all Americans, since these were the words our President chose to quote in a speech when we first went to war in Iraq. When their initial calculation was an action that could be quickly and cleanly accomplished, and instead has turned into a long, drawn out, costly, divisive, confusing and terrible deadly struggle. Do not be misled. Discipleship has its consequences for the disciple every bit as costly, if not more so.

Is Jesus calling the crowd to abandon all they have, to go naked and hungry and homeless into the streets? Of course not.

Is He saying you don't need house and home and income? Of course not. He's not even condemning those blessed with property and wealth. But he is asking disciples to be prepared to spend what they have, their time, their talent, their abilities, and their treasure for His sake. The crowd is not being thanked for following Him that they can sit down and say "we have done our bit, now it is time for someone else to take over the task." He wants those considering discipleship to understand exactly what will be required of them, full time, without a break, should they really seek to be His disciples.

The message is clear. Disciples face real costs in terms of real demands on their time, on their abilities and on the money they have. And since this society is so focused on money, the minimal monetary cost of discipleship is a tithe, one tenth of our income, however you want to calculate it, as freely given to the community of faith, the place where we worship. Give elsewhere and give generously to other charities. But first give to the Lord in His house and give Him at least a tithe! It's a mortifying and humiliating experience when the community of faith has to beg to have a budget met in the face of the failure of the community to meet this basic cost of discipleship which, if faithfully met, would make the bottom line of the budget next to insignificant!

But there's much more. The cost of discipleship includes the vulnerability that comes with sharing with others the story of our faith and being understanding and compassionate and open to them with the love Christ calls us to have. This cost is exactly the opposite to the brow beating, bible bashing hordes who have overrun our airwaves and television channels and have totally confused their faith and THE faith with their political and moral views, such that they seek by misguided mission and misinterpreted scripture, to self-righteously impose their way and their morality upon everyone else in the nation.

The story the genuine disciple shares is one that first comes out of the discipleship, understanding of his or her own brokenness and sinfulness, and then lives out of that forgiven, met with compassion and sincerity and understanding that comes out of the whole experience of being loved and forgiven and accepted despite the sins they've committed, their obvious flaws, and their transgressions, nonetheless they are welcomed with open and loving arms into the family of Christ. From that beginning flows real discipleship, that demonstrates everything Jesus has been talking about, not by following a set of rules or someone else's dictates, not even by trying to get it right, but simply living out of the real transformation that has taken place in the life of the forgiven disciple. Anything other than that is not discipleship. It can't be forced, it can't be achieved, it simply happens because faith is real and is evidenced in genuine living.

Okay, it's over. I don't know about you, but for me, after this (and understand I preach as much to myself as I do to you) after this, I wonder how validly I'm living my own faith, and it's there that we find the heart and secret of this text. For it's not to terrify us or beat us, but it's a cautionary tale which invites us to a real and true evaluation of our relationship with God in Christ, of the depth and reality of our faith, and the strength of our own personal discipleship. And then, then my friends, we come to a table where we are blessed, assured of God's love and salvation and prepared to go back out into the mission field to try again and to try and live it more authentically and better.

I can't tell you the details of your discipleship, and neither you nor anyone else can tell me mine, but do you know what, beloved? I suspect we each know what they are, and we each know what they ought to be.

And you know, that's the way it was back at the juvenile detention center. The two staff members who had thrown me into the lock up finally reappeared after dinner had been served, somewhat later in the evening. They brought with them my clothes and told me to dress and

report to the boss, the head honcho, the man in command. I dressed and in my mind ran through a variety of indignant speeches that I would deliver to him. I walked into his office, but before I could open my mouth he commanded, "Sit!" and, I sat. "How did that feel?" he asked.

That was my chance, having been raised in a seaport, I launched into a colorful linguistic expression of what had happened to me and what I thought of the whole system. When I ran out of steam, he sat back and smiled at me. "Good," he said. "Good." "Now you remember that every time you put a boy in the lock-up and turn the key. Because now you know the cost."

Amen.