

"Estimating the Cost"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 23
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 14: 25-33

Every once in a while, there are news stories that are both bizarre and tragic. In Spain, for example, a poacher shot a deer that was standing on an overhanging rock above him. Unfortunately, he didn't take the time to calculate where the deer might fall. You guessed it. It fell right on him.

Equally as bizarre and tragic is the story of the 22-year-old who wanted to try bungee jumping from a railroad bridge near his home. Did you read about this? He took occy straps, the stretchy little ropes with hooks on each end we use to fasten things to the top of cars, he took a number of those and duck-taped them together, wrapped one end around one of his feet, and anchored the other end to a railroad trestle. He jumped off the 70-foot bridge. What he forgot to check was the length of the cord he had assembled. You see, it was five feet longer than the 70-foot bridge. Surely, we think to ourselves, he would have figured this out before he jumped. But he didn't and the result was tragic.

Poor planning will do you in every time. Some poor planning just leads to humorous news stories. It seems that city officials in Nottingham, England, bought 215 solar-powered parking meters a few years ago after studies had shown that sun-drenched Mediterranean countries had saved a fortune in maintenance costs. Can you guess the problem with this plan? British summers enjoy a noticeable lack of sun and the winters are gray and rainy most days. Now over one-fourth of the machines don't work, much to the delight of local motorists. In typical British understatement, a city Councilor said, "It was an ill-thought scheme." No kidding.

It's a story told time and time again. Somebody didn't look ahead. As someone has said, "Let's all sing that wonderful old hymn about the church that spent two million dollars for a new building and didn't have enough left over to buy pews. You know: 'Stand Up! Stand Up for Jesus!'"

A large crowd was following Jesus. Some of them doubtless followed out of curiosity. He was an exciting communicator and he performed amazing works of healing. And besides, he tweaked the Pharisees, and that was fun to see.

But Jesus' preaching was a two-edged sword. The Gospel message is no less true today. It is said that good preaching should "comfort the challenged and challenge the comfortable."

Large crowds had been following Jesus, and it was time to get serious. He was on his way to Jerusalem and his destiny on a cross, and it was time to challenge the comfort level of the curious who followed him. "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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Strong words and we need to understand them in the first century context. Jesus really isn't asking us to "hate" our families. This is a form of Semitic hyperbole, which exaggerates a contrast to make a clear point. Hate does not mean anger or hostility. It means that one's response to the demands of discipleship must come first. There is no duty, according to Jesus, higher than commitment to Jesus, not even that highest of human institutions, the family. Second, this saying would be heard by those first-century followers as a reality they would come to know. Discipleship, following Jesus to Jerusalem and to a cross, required a willingness to leave home and family and travel from village to village with little but the clothes on their backs.

Discipleship, Jesus says right off the bat, requires a reordering of our priorities and a willingness to take up a new lifestyle, one based on commitment to Jesus Christ and his work of reconciliation and redemption. There is a cost, says Jesus, to following him. For some, it will be enormous. And lest the crowd that followed Jesus that day missed the point of what he was saying, he provided two examples of what it means to count the cost. The first is of a man who counts the cost of construction before building a tower. By such careful reckoning, the builder not only avoids littering the landscape with an unfinished building, he avoids as well the taunts of his neighbors. The second example is of a king who considers going to war with 10,000 soldiers against an opponent of 20,000. If he goes to war under such conditions, he must be confident of victory, or else he seeks the alternative and "sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace."

Jesus is driving his point home to his listeners. The man who builds the tower and the king who goes to war will count everything that does not advance those objectives as worthless and meaningless. Great sacrifices must be made for great gains. You must count the cost.

I can imagine that the crowds thinned out after hearing that. This is not a come-as-you-are parade. This is a march to Jerusalem and a cross. This is no walk in the park with Jesus. This is a death march for a king whose crown will be thorns and whose throne will be a wooden pedestal.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that Lutheran pastor in Germany, who lost his life for trying to end Hitler's Third Reich, who wrote a whole book on this subject called, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it he said these very poignant words, "When Christ calls a man to follow him, he bids him come and die."

Following Jesus means more than following the crowd to *admire* him. It means taking his claim *on* our lives seriously and prayerfully so that we can respond to his call *with* our lives. It means we prayerfully consider how we can be an active part of his body, the church, not just one who joins the crowd, nods our heads at the words of hymns and prayers and sermons, but one who listens, absorbs, and tries honestly to understand what it means for them to be a follower where they live, work and play. It means we serve others, in the model of the one whose life stands before us and in whose image we are made, and we seek to be his hands and feet in the world. It means we stand up for injustice when we see it rear its ugly head. It means we work for peace in our corners of the world, practicing the art of forgiveness and reconciliation among one another. It means we take seriously the use of our gifts in service to the one who gave them to us. It means we learn to sacrifice and give, so that the message of Jesus can be carried to all the corners of our world. It means we live our lives each day, each hour, each

moment, under the Lordship of Jesus the Christ. "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." It can't be any simpler to say nor harder to do than that.

William Willimon was the Dean of the Duke University Chapel, a prolific writer, and, more recently, a Methodist Bishop. It is said that he hasn't had an unpublished thought, but his writings are consistently thoughtful and worth reading. He tells the tale, one time, about an irate father who phoned him one day, accusing him of influencing his daughter to make a decision that he felt was foolish. You see, she had informed her father that she intended to go on a Presbyterian mission to Haiti.

"Isn't that absurd!" the man shouted on the phone. "She has a degree in mechanical engineering from Duke and she wants to throw it all away digging ditches in Haiti. And you're responsible for this!" he accused.

"What are you talking about?" Willimon inquired.

The father explained that Willimon had won his daughter's admiration and that he had influenced her to make this stupid decision.

Willimon writes that he was on the verge of losing his ministerial composure and yell right back at the man, but instead he asked if the father wasn't the one who had had her baptized a Christian.

"Well, yes, but . . ." the man stammered.

Willimon went on to ask if he hadn't read her Bible stories and brought her to Sunday School and worship.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Don't but me," the Dean finally exploded. "It's your fault that she decided to throw it all away on Jesus, not mine. You're to blame that she believes all that stuff about the Gospel because you're the one who introduced her to Jesus."

"But all we ever wanted," came the reply back, "was for her to be a Presbyterian."

"Sorry, you messed up," came Willimon's closing retort, "you messed up and made her a disciple."

With that story fresh in our ears, I'll just remind everyone of Trinity's Mission Statement. Anyone remember? *Making Disciples, Disciples in the Making*. I truly hope we aren't into making Lutherans here, because Jesus' invitation to committed discipleship is still aimed at those who would follow him, and that would be those who still gather to hear his word and share in his meal; us.

Amen.

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