

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP ~ LUKE 14:25-33

When Call Committees go through the search process for a new pastor there is a very detailed process in which they must follow. I am glad I am always on the interviewee side of the process.

I thought of their awesome task as I read our Gospel lesson and quickly determined that Jesus of Nazareth would probably not get very far in the call process. A good candidate needs to be someone who will make worship appealing, attract visitors, foster faith formation, and build a community of caring people and for some be all things to all people. A healthy congregation should be like a healthy home where people are fed regularly, an atmosphere of calm is maintained, and people are loving and happy.

I am afraid Jesus would not rank high on the list of candidates for consideration to fulfill those tasks. Sorry, Jesus. All this talk about hating family, giving up possessions, and embracing suffering is a colossal turn-off. I am afraid the fellow from northern Galilee would not be among the finalists!

Our Gospel lesson today has very little popular appeal. You do not have to be a child to be troubled by these words about hating parents and siblings. Most of us love our brothers and sisters and treasure our mother and father.

In mainline congregations like Zion Lutheran Church we try to avoid such harsh concepts. We want people to be happy, feel comfortable, and have confidence that they made a good decision when they aligned themselves with Zion. So we yearn to hear about God's love, about the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of the Christian faith, and to receive an invitation to join a community of values that serves people in need. We do not like talk about sacrifice and taking up the cross.

But if we do not speak about the cost of discipleship for the Christian, are we telling the truth? Our Gospel lesson would suggest that we are not. These words of Jesus, recorded in Luke 14, are an urgent reminder that the Christian faith is a way of being, a way of living, a way of doing things differently because we are baptized followers of Jesus Christ; Christianity is not simply a way of thinking or knowing.

Jesus talks about sacrifice, but sacrifice today is not unique to the Christian Church. Everywhere we look we see people making sacrifices:

Think of the parents who give up almost every weekend to support their children and their athletic activities, often putting thousands of miles on the car;

Think of career-minded men and women who put in long hours at their work and endure grueling travel schedules in order to provide a good life for their families;

Think of folks who deny themselves in order to dress their children nicely, to provide a memorable vacation, to save for their children's education, and to help adult children with their burdens and debt.

People in our society are already making sacrifices without church encouragement. What Jesus is asking today is that we think about the things for which we are sacrificing. Have we made the main thing the main thing? Participation in sports and dance, and physical exercise ... these are good things, but do they build moral strength, do they instill faith in the lives of your children, do they deepen a commitment to be a follower of Jesus Christ?

In providing a "good life," are you excluding the church and spiritual formation? Are the trophies and ribbons and certificates of achievement worth denying your children a life-altering relationship with God?

Faith is not inherited, nor can it be acquired through a crash course in a moment of crisis. Faith comes from generosity and commitment and the regular practice of being in the presence of God.

One of the supreme handicaps that the Church must endure is that within it are many who happily follow Jesus from a safe distance and very few who are prepared to put their lives on the line for the Lord and the Kingdom he proclaims.

Today we hear Jesus address the crowds and tell them what it will mean to follow him. He sets down three difficult conditions in what we might call the great Cannot Statements of our Gospel lesson:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brother and sister, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. [v. 26] Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. [v. 27] So therefore, you cannot become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. [v. 33]

Faith requires putting the vision of God first in your life, ahead of the vision of home and family, in short the vision of our lesser kingdoms. If these words sound hard, I can assure you that they were equally disturbing to people of Jesus' time who wanted to hear about getting not giving, winning not losing, living not dying. They wanted to hear about crowns worn, not crosses borne.

What we have in our Gospel lesson are intentionally strong statements by one who knew he was beginning the supreme battle of his life. Jesus knew that choices and decisions shape us. Daily Jesus faced the temptation of the crowds that pressed in upon him with flattery and adulation, but rarely with understanding and commitment.

Jesus tells two parables in our Gospel lesson – one about a man building a tower in his vineyard, and the other about a king planning a battle. Both stories warn us of the danger of insufficient planning and a lack of perseverance. It is the Christian's first duty to count the cost of following Jesus Christ.

Jesus wants no disillusioned disciples. He never wants someone to say, I had no idea it would be so difficult. Jesus speaks clearly. He wants us to calculate the cost before we sign on.

The Christian life is a commitment. It demands of us that we take charge of our destiny and that we persevere. No half finished towers. No abandoned battles. We dare not succumb to a sentimental Christianity that fades in and fades out. He who endures to the end will be saved [Matthew 24:13], Jesus once said. Let us be counted among those who are faithful to the end. AMEN.