

Counting the Cost

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You can imagine the scene. Jesus has been teaching and healing for many chapters now in Luke's gospel. And some chapters back he started to tell folks where his journey was leading—to Jerusalem, to the cross. But the crowds—the crowds just keep growing. Finally, he turns to them and says, *Look, this isn't easy, and it isn't cheap*. “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” (14:26).

This is not a great marketing message, today, for the church. We didn't put this passage on giveaways in the orientation packets for new students. We probably won't print it on a banner and hang it out on the Quadrangle for Parents' Weekend, for that matter. It is stern stuff, and it sounds strange and a little alienating to our ears.

Now, when the translation says “hate,” what it is trying to get at is an issue of loyalty. It is a bit of linguistic hyperbole, and what it really means is, “Unless you put loyalty to me before all other loyalties, you cannot be my disciple.” Jesus is saying that our first loyalties have to be to him and his message—everything else, even the closest human relationships—must come in second.

And then he goes on: *Who builds a tower without first considering the cost? Who goes to war without first considering the cost?* You must be prepared to give up everything, if you want to be a disciple. The warning to his hearers is clear: if they are going to follow him, it will mean turning away from old loyalties and embracing a new one; it will mean risking alienation; it will mean risking material things; it will mean risking life and limb.

Some of this would not have been a huge surprise for Jesus's original hearers. If you wanted to follow a wandering teacher in first-century Palestine—and Jesus wasn't the only one—then, of necessity, you would be leaving behind family and friends. These teachers were ascetic figures, and they and their students—their

Text of a sermon preached in All Saints' Chapel at The University of the South on Sunday, September 8, 2013. (Proper 18C; Luke 14:25-43.)

disciples—left behind home and family. Also, the first Christians who retold this story would have known something of this as well. A person who converted to the new Christian faith risked family rejection, as any number of early Christians found out, and sometimes, during periods of persecution, they risked imprisonment and death.

Now, for us this sounds remote, and that is because the Jesus that we see represented out there in our world often seems to mirror the world's values. Indeed, not so long ago, a sure way to raise your social standing was to join the church—the *right* church. Following Jesus would add to your possessions, not decrease them. That still holds true in some places. Again, Jesus is often invoked in our culture by the people who talk at length about family values—admittedly, they seem to have a very narrow picture of family, and they don't mention what Jesus said about hating father and mother. But they are not the only ones who do that: many parish churches focus most of their energy and attention on families, and the loneliest place in the world can be to be a single person in church on Sunday—it's as if you are invisible.

All this suggests that we have taken Jesus and domesticated him. We have made him fit the “stuff” that we have absorbed from our culture, from the world. But all our efforts to domesticate Jesus eventually run into trouble, and in this morning's gospel passage they run into a buzz saw. There is no way to make this Jesus into the cuddly Jesus portrayed in bad art with little children all around him, a fluffy lamb on his shoulders. This is *scary* Jesus.

But Jesus isn't trying to frighten anyone. He is just giving full disclosure. There is a *cost* to following him. To be sure, there is very little cost in this country for wearing the *label* of “Christian,” but there can be a very high cost for actually *following* Jesus, for actually *trying to live* the way that Jesus calls us to live. You may get branded as disreputable or unseemly. You may lose out on jobs. You may even get physically hurt.

When Paul Jones, a bishop of the church, questioned whether this country should go to war in 1917, he was forced out of office. Questioning whether force was the best way to respond to aggression overseas against a third party was considered out-of-bounds by the other bishops. The other bishops didn't even want the conversation. When Jones tried to encourage us to live out Jesus's teaching against violence, he paid the cost.

When Martin Luther King wrote his letter from the Birmingham jail fifty years ago to rebuke clergy leaders—including two Episcopal bishops—who had opposed the demonstrations for civil rights in Alabama, he lamented that so few from the church had broken what he called “the paralyzing chains of conformity” to the status quo and had joined as “active partners” in the struggle for equality. The clergy that he addressed had substituted conformity to the powers

and principalities of this world in place of conformity to the gospel. And when Dr. King told people about his dream fifty years ago last month, he knew that there would be a cost, because the point of his dream was not that everyone was going to get along—though that was part of the vision. The point was that people of color were going to be sitting in seats that they had not been allowed to sit in before—right alongside the white folk. *And* they would be accepted. Dr. King called in as “past due” the promises that this country had made in its founding documents. But more than that, he called us to account for the ways that we had strayed from the vision of the gospel. King dared to say it. Everyone heard it. And he paid with his life.

Others paid a cost too. John Lewis, the civil-rights activist whose skull was fractured by the Alabama State Police; Myles Horton and the Highlander Folk School, from just down the road in Monteagle, who were persecuted by the state of Tennessee for their activism. They tried to call us to live as if there were neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, black nor white. They called us to live by the gospel. And so they paid a price.

When you start taking Jesus seriously, there is going to be a cost. When you start living as if what he taught matters, when you start putting loyalty to the gospel ahead of all of our other human imperatives, then there is going to be a cost.

So we need a warning label on the font. We need some kind of informed-consent form for baptism. Do you really know what you are getting into? If we take it seriously, nothing will ever be the same again once you go through those waters. The church will be doing its job when people pause before they cross that threshold, when they have to strengthen their nerve before they hit the water in the font, when they flinch before they eat the bread and drink the wine. Because that will mean the church will be proclaiming the Jesus who was and is, not the one that we tried to invent to bless our baggage.

Because, if we take Jesus seriously, we can't live the way we did before. It changes our perspective. We have to throw open the doors to people who have been kept out. We have to make sure that folks have enough to live with dignity—enough education, enough food, enough shelter. And enough respect. In short, we have to live what Jesus taught with authenticity.

That will mean something different to each one of us. For some, it may mean volunteering with the Community Action Committee, stuffing grocery bags so that the hungry will be fed. For others, it may mean asking, in inopportune moments, why there are hungry people in this county. For some, it may mean volunteering as a tutor so that struggling kids at the elementary school who don't have support at home get the chance to learn, or helping kids at the high school with college applications, when they are the first in their family to have

a chance to go. For others, it may mean asking, in inconvenient times and places, why we don't adequately fund our school. This spring, for a senior, it may mean turning down a good job offer and a good salary from a bank to go work as a community organizer—in spite of the likely parental shock. Or it might mean taking that job, and then giving to help others have opportunities. And for the folks at the LGBT house a few days back, it meant hanging the flag back up, after it had been vandalized, in order to send the message that there is a safe place on this campus for LGBT students.¹ The particular ways that we live this out will be different, but it will mean giving, helping, and sacrificing—paying a cost. And you and I are called to make those hard choices, to stand up and follow the call of Jesus to a life of justice, no matter what the cost may be.

Now this will make you weird, because this is not something that the world understands. It means giving money and time to people in need. It means welcoming people who have been told by others that they don't fit the mold, and treating them as children of God. It means empowering people whom the powers and principalities would like to keep down. It may also mean losing professional opportunities or sacrificing material comforts. It may make some of us strange in the eyes of our families. It may make us disreputable in the eyes of the important people.

In other words, it may make us begin to look like Jesus.

So let's embrace the cost. Let's go out and be thoroughly disreputable. And then your works will shine, so that everyone will know that you have chosen to follow Jesus.

¹ The rainbow flag hanging outside the Gender and Sexual Diversity House on the college campus was vandalized on August 29, 2013.



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