

## *The Cost of Discipleship*

14th Sunday after Pentecost – September 5, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

*Scripture Passage (NRSV)*

*Luke 14:25-33*

<sup>25</sup>Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup>“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. <sup>27</sup>Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup>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? <sup>29</sup>Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, <sup>30</sup>saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ <sup>31</sup>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? <sup>32</sup>If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. <sup>33</sup>So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

*Today, we return to the Lectionary and consider one of Jesus' surprising (even hard?) sayings.*

*Eyes wide open*

Have you ever volunteered for a project without really realizing what you were taking on. Perhaps people were afraid to tell you the whole story for fear that you'd back out if you knew the truth. Or perhaps in your own enthusiasm, you simply failed to think it through. At one time or another, most of us have probably said to ourselves, “What have I gotten myself into!?” In today's passage from Luke, Jesus ensures that no one could accuse him of misleading his disciples about the path they had chosen.

*The long and winding road*

Today's passage is another in the long section of Luke's Gospel that narrates Jesus' final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. In 9:51, Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” It is impossible to tell from Luke's account exactly how long Jesus took to reach Jerusalem, but the journey was by no means direct. Along the way, Jesus teaches and heals. He sends out seventy others who are to go ahead of him to every town Jesus planned to visit himself. At times, Jesus withdraws from the growing crowds; at others, he is beset by large crowds. In today's passage, Jesus has attracted large crowds. But in the midst of their enthusiasm, Jesus turns to confront them.

*Hating??*

Jesus pulls no punches with the crowds. They may be caught up in the excitement of Jesus' journey, but they better understand the cost of discipleship: there can be no higher priority than Jesus. If Mom calls

#### Jesus Knows?

Today's study leads to a question that we often end up discussing at length in my Bible Academy classes. The question comes down to this: “What did Jesus know and when did he know it?” How much did he really know about the road ahead?

When it comes to Jesus, we struggle to understand our proclamation that Jesus is fully God and fully human. It is a worthwhile struggle but, in the end, we cannot really make sense of it. When we try too hard, we end up making regrettable mistakes.

Many of the people in my classes tend to over-emphasize Jesus' divinity at the expense of his humanity. For them, when Jesus warns his disciples about the road ahead, it is because he sees the future in much the same way that you and I know what is coming in a movie we've already seen. After all, if God knows the future and Jesus is God, then isn't it logical to believe that Jesus knew the future in a way that you or I never could? It may seem logical, but it is not correct. In a letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that Jesus “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . in human likeness” (2:7).

Jesus was not born knowing how to read. He had to be taught the same way all children are taught. When Jesus asked his disciples whether they were ready to bear the cost of discipleship, he was not looking into some sort of crystal ball. Jesus knew that he was on a collision course with the temple leadership and the Romans. And he knew that he would not abandon the vocation given him by the Father. Jesus knew that he would be “obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). But would his disciples?

and says to give up the journey and come home, Jesus warns that you better be prepared to hang up the phone. Jesus comes before mother . . . or father . . . or siblings . . . or even life itself. Jesus' talk of "hate" is not about malice or hostility toward our parents nor is it about self-loathing. It is about being willing to turn away from anyone or anything that would pull us away from Jesus. But there is more.

For you and me, Jesus' talk about carrying a cross (v. 27) is a figure of speech. For anyone in the crowd that day, the cross was a stark reality. Some in the crowds would have been old enough to

### *The Cost of Discipleship*

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April, 1945, for his part in an attempt on Hitler's life. *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) is his most well-known book. Had Bonhoeffer been in the crowd on the day that Jesus turned and confronted his disciples, he would have understood Jesus' talk of crosses. Listen to these words, written as the Nazi darkness fell across Germany:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. . . . Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. . . . Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate . . ."

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field . . . it is the pearl of great price . . . it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him. . . . Costly grace is the gospel which must be *sought* again and again, the gift which must be *asked* for, the door at which a man must *knock*. . . . it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. . . . Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son. . . . Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life."

The *Cost of Discipleship* is my September book recommendation. It is available in our bookstore, Inspiration.

*Bonhoeffer's words moved my heart deeply even as I transcribed them. Your heart will be moved also. Spend some time with this book.*

remember thirty years before when the Romans had crucified thousands of Galilean Jews. The rest would have been told the story. The horror of crucifixion was a very real possibility for anyone who continued on with Jesus. You and I may not face death as a consequence of our faith in Christ, though some Christians still do. For us, the question is whether we can even recognize that there is a cost to our discipleship. If we believe there is no cost, then we are not hearing Jesus. As he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 14:35)

*Fools at work and at war*<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was such a great teacher. So often, he would make his point by telling a story and usually a brief story at that. Jesus didn't use parables because he wanted to obscure his message but because he wanted to illuminate his message. We can participate in Jesus' stories in a way that we could never participate in a saying or some sort of theological explanation.

After confronting the crowd with the cost of discipleship, Jesus tells two brief parables to illustrate a simple point: only fools would start a project without being pretty sure they could finish it. None of us would build a new house without understanding the costs and doing all we could to ensure that we could finish the job. Similarly, using a military analogy, Jesus notes that no wise king would wage war without the prospect of victory.

But could we ever be sure that we can pay the cost of discipleship? No, of course not. Peter would deny Jesus three times. But still, our call to discipleship is to be all consuming. This can be no half-hearted commitment. No part of our lives can be excluded from this commitment, including our wallets and relationships and, as Jesus pointedly notes, our possessions (v. 33).<sup>2</sup> I sometimes hear people (including myself!) use the term "committed Christian." I guess I know what we mean, but it is deeply regrettable that we feel the need to say it. "Committed Christian" ought to be a redundancy. Let us pray that it is so with each of us.

<sup>1</sup>from Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Dr. Culpepper's observations on this passage were a big help in the preparation of this study.

<sup>2</sup>The Greek verb translated "give up" literally means "to say farewell to," as in waving goodbye!

## Daily Bible Readings

*(more on the cost of discipleship)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 14:34-35 These verses immediately follow today's reading. What do you think Jesus means by this analogy to salt?</p>	<p>Day 2 Luke 9:18-27 Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah and the demands of discipleship.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Kings 19:19-21 Elisha gives up everything (and he has a lot!) to follow Elijah. He slaughtered his livestock so that he can never go back.</p>	<p>Day 4 Philippians 3:7-11 Everything we think we might lose for the sake of Christ is the loss of so much "rubbish"</p>
<p>Day 5 Acts 6:8 - 8:1 Stephen must confront the cost of his discipleship. He was the first of Jesus' followers to be executed.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **Fall Bible Academy starts in a week!**

We are offering the largest array of morning, afternoon, and evening classes yet. Even if you've never been to a Bible study of any sort, there is something for you. Here is another anonymous comment from a spring 2004 class evaluation:

"I am reading, understanding, and enjoying the Bible more. I am learning more what it means to be a Christian. I am a goal-setter and my Christianity has become central to all my goals."

**You can register on-line at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)**

Have you ever thought about joining a Sunday morning class but haven't been sure how to begin? Mark your calendar now. The adult Sunday morning classes are going to host an **open-house** in three weeks, on **September 26**. ALL the classes will be hosting visitors. This will be a great chance to check it out!

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What do you think some people mean when they use the phrase "committed Christian?" What are they trying to convey? In your own experience what are some visible differences between those who seem more committed disciples of Jesus Christ and those who seem not? What leads some people to be more committed than others?
2. Make a list of ten "costs" of discipleship that might be faced by a person in our church. How hard is it to come up with ten? In his reflections on today's passage from Luke, Dr. Culpepper writes "Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith had progressed steadily in recent years. As a result, many see no tension between the teachings of Jesus and the common aspirations of middle-class Americans." Do you agree with Dr. Culpepper? If so, how could we begin to recognize the tension, to recognize the cost of discipleship? If you don't agree with Dr. Culpepper, why not? What do you see as being the major points of tension that *do* exist between Christ's teachings and our ambitions?
3. In their book, *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas and Willimon take a very different position. They hold that whereas it was once difficult to see much difference between Christianity and American culture, that has all changed. Instead, Christians are having to make their way in an increasingly hostile culture. Hence, Christians are "resident aliens" more so than ever before! Discuss what you think they mean. They hold that this change is an opportunity for the Christianity we practice to become more authentic. Do you agree?