

“Discipleship: Cost or Investment?” – Luke 14:25-33 – Sept 4/16

Well, where to begin? Here we have in this reading from Luke’s gospel another one of those really challenging passages. The challenge arises because the images from Jesus presented here are pretty hard to hear and even difficult to understand. At first the basic message seems simple enough, raising the issue of an impossibly difficult discipleship, and many misconstrue the call in exactly that way. We think of people in public processions straining under the burden of huge and heavy crosses, hoping both to emulate Jesus and to be true to this gospel passage. Other gruesome images come to mind of people hanging themselves on meat hooks poked through their skin in order to symbolically “carry the cross.” In past times generations of monks have hung their self-inflicted isolation on this and similar passages, turning away from family and real life. In our society today there are untold thousands who make sure that everyone around them knows just what crosses they have to bear – even if none of those crosses have anything to do with faith!

I believe we need to recognize however that the message here is deeper and more meaningful than overt displays of piety, are such displays are not quite what Jesus was talking about when he turned to the crowds following him. Note first of all that these were large crowds – by this point in Luke’s gospel his ministry was by all accounts a roaring success if you count numbers of followers as the criteria for success, because he was drawing huge crowds. Jesus turned to speak to the large crowds, but what he had to say was not exactly what you would expect a hugely popular preacher in a large mega-church to say. Well, on second thought, many of them do preach a message of “count the cost” and “carry the cross” all in one breath, but on such occasions they’re usually referring to financial sacrifices.

Here, Jesus is not urging the people to follow him but instead urging them to consider whether they really want to or not. Quite possibly he has some growing concerns that he is becoming a trendy fad, a kind of rock star celebrity, and that his message is being lost in the popular adulation, and so here he is telling the people that they can only legitimately call themselves his followers if they are serious. Now how many preachers have the nerve to say, “come here to church only if you’re serious about your faith – otherwise, go home!” Well, there are some who do just that, but they usually have a pretty limited concept of what they mean by ‘serious’ – putting on a pious smile, being enthusiastic, asking no questions, contributing lots of money. Jesus is also saying “follow me only if you’re serious” but he has quite a different meaning to serious. For Jesus, “if you’re going to be my disciple it’s going to cost you not only everything you have but everything you are.” That’s a tough message!

And to reinforce his tough message he uses a hugely scandalous image. We in the twenty-first century understand his reference to “carrying the cross” in a totally different way from what the large crowds would have heard. We hear the Cross linked intimately with the Resurrection and so when Jesus talks about the cost of discipleship it has a great deal of ultimately positive meaning for us. However, those original listeners would have heard the reference to the cross as a call to an odious, publicly humiliating act, a call to do something they would never, ever, have considered doing. To the large, adulating, religious-rock-star adoring crowd such words must have grated like nails on a chalkboard.

But it was precisely to such a large crowd of followers that Jesus turned and confronted them and dampened their enthusiasm with this startling challenge to surrender everything if they intended to continue to follow them. But before we are able to dig any deeper we need to understand the word “hate” as in “whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother ...” The word translated “hate” here is not the emotion-filled word we experience in the scream “I

hate you!” If that was the case, this verse would undo all the calls to love, to understand, to forgive, to care for others especially one’s own family that are found throughout both Old and New Testaments. The word “hate” here is a Semitic way of expressing detachment, a turning away from. Hating one’s own life is not here a call to self-loathing, to throw one’s body across the doorway and beg the world to trample on it as though it were a doormat. The apostle Paul in Colossians even called such “self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body” as valueless.

So then, what was Jesus calling for from those who would follow him? What would those who would be his disciples be called to do, to turn away from, to give up? The two parables that Jesus provided as examples offer some clues. The first parable deals with building a tower – presumably a watch tower to keep an eye on crops and livestock, and thus a rural example. The second parable is about as urban as it gets, dealing with the royal decider deciding whether to go to war or not. Two different settings, two different sets of consequences – albeit both of them possibly embarrassing at best. But there is a common element in both these parables, emphasised by the repeating of the exact same phrase: “sit down first and consider ...”

You’re already sitting, but do the considering part. This is about as clear a call as one can hear to the cognitive, not the emotional. This is a call to use your head to evaluate whether your heart is running amok. How different is that from the usual emotional interpretation of abandoning all reason along with everything else to follow Jesus? In so many of the large crowds following Jesus today the call is to let the emotions run rampant, don’t ask any questions just let yourself go and follow Jesus – in the way we tell you, of course. Clean living, enthusiastic participation in emotion-filled worship, the right smile, donating lots of money – these are often the measures of “sacrifice” called for by the big crowds today. But the same people warn their followers to “don’t use your head, don’t ask any deep and probing questions.”

That’s the opposite of what Jesus said – Jesus said “sit down and consider...” Use your head. Ask the tough questions, such as “what does true discipleship look like?” Or, “Am I up for this?” Perhaps even, “What will following Jesus cost me in real terms?” Asking such tough questions will soon bring you to realize that being a disciple of Christ does involve a real cost. Your priorities will shift – instead of asking as the world does, “what’s in it for me?” you will be moved to ask, “what can I offer?” You will come to see that you are called to make that extra effort to love someone who you think is totally unlikeable – and that could even be yourself! You will be giving up not only your material possessions – understanding how temporary those are – but the very foundation of who you are. That is the toughest possession of all – your very self.

But just as in all other areas of life, you need to consider whether this is a cost, or an investment. Costs are simple expenditures, usually for transient returns of equal value. Investments on the other hand are expenditures that result in long-term gains, offering returns much greater in magnitude. With that understanding, realize that Jesus is not here issuing a call to self-abuse, to self-abasement, or to monastic poverty. Quite the opposite, he is inviting those who would follow him to discover the richness of life he offers – “life, and life abundant” is how he put it. The return on this investment of yourself is more than a heavenly reward, which is incentive enough, but moreover the discovering and living a life full of meaning and value, seeing others as Christ sees you – a child in need of grace, a redeemed person for whom the love of God has been expressed in Christ’s death and resurrection. Beyond that heavenly reward for giving up yourself to follow Christ lies a richness of life in the here and now.

It is true that following Christ can and often will create tensions not only between you and family and between you and friends, but also creates tensions between you and you – within yourself! That is inevitable, and part of the cost to which Jesus refers. But the return on investment of anything you have to surrender, the payback of seeing someone else (or even yourself!) finally come to understand that they are loved not only by God but by other people and that it's ok for them to love themselves is more than enough payback for any possessions given up.

We should probably take a step back at this point and recap the “bigger picture.” We need to recognize that Jesus is NOT saying, “do not follow me.” Instead he is urging people to ask themselves, “am I up for this?” It seems clear enough from everything else Jesus said that he was indeed calling for people to follow him and he wanted them to be clear that they would be called to heavily invest themselves in that act of following.

That's an appropriate message for us on this first Sunday in September. The church year as defined by the Lectionary starts at Advent, but for us it seems that “back to school” time is another significant start to the church year. The lazy, hazy days of summer are winding down, and by contrast the hectic pace of church life is picking up. People are, for the most part, back from vacation travels. Meetings that have been (blessedly!) put on hold for the summer now resume their usual demands for time and travel. It is a time when we get serious again about ministries, and missions, and renew our enthusiasm for major and exciting challenges such as our new building. Canadian Thanksgiving, Synod, Advent and Christmas loom just around the corner.

It is that time of year, so do sit down and, as Jesus urges, carefully consider the costs of discipleship, or better yet consider the investments of discipleship. Are we up for this year's adventures in faith? Sure we are. With the excitement and satisfaction and sense of fulfillment of living out our discipleship to Christ we are charged and ready. With the promise of his presence and peace, and the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are primed and ready to throw ourselves completely into following Jesus, buoyed by the grace and Spirit of God.