

**The Cost of Discipleship**  
**A sermon preached on the Fifteen Sunday after Pentecost, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010**  
**Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Philemon; and Luke 14:25-33**

*Lord Jesus, I give you my hands to do your work. I give you my feet to go your way. I give you my eyes to see as you do. I give you my tongue to speak your words. I give you my mind that you may think in me. I give you my spirit that you may pray in me. Above all, I give you my heart that you may love in me... I give you my whole self that you may grow in me, so that it is you, Lord Jesus, who live and work and pray in me. Amen.—Lancelot Andrewes.*

Paul writes to Philemon, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ... I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ... For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love... .”

“Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, ‘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... So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.’”

What a nice clear message for the official end of our summer days with the families we love and the things we enjoy so much. Well, maybe not so nice. Hate your family. Carry a cross. And give up all your stuff. Now, don’t you wish you had done like everyone else and gone out of town for the Labor Day weekend, or at least skipped church to get the barbeque going?

As for me, by God’s grace, I’m not about to quit loving my family. What’s more, even the Lord may have hard time talking me out of my fourteen year-old Cannondale bicycle, which, over years, has become like a member of the family. If that were not enough, there’s also a solemn warning: carrying the cross requires calculation and commitment, like a farmer building a watchtower in his vineyard or a king getting ready to go to war against an enemy. Count the cost.

I wish I would have read this text before sending, not just one, but now two kids off to college this fall, one finishing a jazz studies major, and the other starting an English major. Count the cost of that. Believe me, I’ve been trying, and I just can’t count so fast.

Think about what you are doing before you say yes, Jesus says to the adoring crowds; decide first if you are willing to stay with me all the way to the cross, because going only halfway will fail, and it will fail miserably, and then everybody will make fun of you because you can’t finish. The Lord seems to have no use for lukewarm.

Now, before we give Jesus’ hard words the saltwater treatment—first you water them down, then you take them with a grain of salt—we should surely take a look at their first century, Palestinian color. After a shaky start in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus is finally catching on with the masses. Crowds, in fact, large crowds are lining up behind him. There is no better evidence for effective ministry than having crowds of people lining up at your doors and cars filling your parking lots for church on Sunday morning. All fifty-two of you, packing these pews, elbow-to-elbow, should-to-shoulder, cars lining up on Maplewood Road are the very best validation for our ministry, right? And to anybody who thinks I’m not doing my job, I say, “Well, I guess you haven’t seen the masses of people that have been streaming into church this hot, humid summer.”

Jesus has seen the masses. But right then, in the face of his overwhelming success, “he turned and said to them... .” And Jesus says, “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.” Ouch! And furthermore, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple... .” Ouch! “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” Ouch, again and again! That last one really hurts.

The crowds put on the brakes, “We’re not so sure we want to be his disciples; after all, we thought we was into love.” Well, Jesus is into love, maybe greater love than we were expecting, hoping for, or even wanting. Note that when Jesus spews the frightening demand to hate one’s family, even life itself, there is nothing of the emotion that we experience in the expression, “I hate you.” Jesus is using an expression of that context meaning to turn away from, to detach oneself from, and to give him our undivided loyalty (see Alan Culpepper’s commentary on the Gospel of Luke). And you know that this ultimate loyalty to Jesus can sustain our love for the family, well beyond our ability to love; and it can also create conflict with the family, conflict that otherwise would not have been there except for our loyalty to Jesus. Keep in mind, it would not be the first time that Jesus has exaggerated in order to make a point. Remember, “If your hand causes you to sin... If your eye causes you to sin... .” Passages like one from the First Letter to Timothy clearly urge love of the family, “And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” But Jesus is on a roll.

“Anybody who begins to build a tower without counting the cost, runs the risk of looking stupid when he runs out of brick and can’t finish the tower... Any king who goes to war without first considering whether or not he has the troops to win the war may look dumb as he begs for peace.” Remember, building the Jerusalem Temple (“Anybody who begins to build a tower...”) and fighting God’s battle against the occupying oppressors (“Any king who goes to war...”) constituted the Messiah’s task. Jesus’ body would be that temple. Jesus’ battle would be against evil. The question is: Were these crowds ready to pay the price? Were they ready to enlist in the battle? Well, when Jesus had finished his sermon, the great crowds had gotten a great deal smaller because what Jesus is about to do is extremely costly. In the end we find out that no one but Jesus is willing to pay such a price from God’s eternal wellspring of love.

Think about what you are doing before you say yes. Are you sure you want to follow him? Is the price more than you are willing to pay? These are questions that Christians are asked to wrestle with every day of our lives—in our labors, in our homes, among others, in the church, on the playing fields. What will it cost me to love as Jesus has loved me? What will I have to spend for Jesus who spent everything for us?

When I look at Christians in other countries, and when I read about them in other periods of history, I realize that being a Christian in our culture can cost us so very little. Grace can be very cheap in the United States. Anyone can call themselves a Christian and still live pretty much like everybody else. People can belong to a church and it doesn’t necessarily change a thing about them and the way they live their lives.

Just as salt can lose its taste, so can the initial commitment to our Lord fade in the course of time. Salt does not decide to become pepper; it just gradually loses its taste. The process of assimilating to the surrounding culture can be so gradual that no one really notices that we have become as tasteless, maybe even as ruthless, as the society we live in.

It has been a long time since those ordination vows, and longer since those confirmation vows, and even longer since those baptismal vows. Salt can become tasteless. I can become bland, complacent, numb. What good is salt that has no flavor? What good are Christians who have lost the zest that brings out the flavor of Christ's Spirit in others, in the church, in society? I oftentimes ruminate about my ministry and despair over the church, wondering, "Where is the fire? What is the purpose? How to flavor it? Where's the Lord leading? Do I have anything left to offer? Who needs it?"

Regrettably, in churches with declining memberships and floundering budgets, most of us are afraid to talk about the costs of discipleship, the price of those vows, the commitment our Lord is calling for. So, we say, let's make church membership easy, attractive, user-friendly, comfortable, and definitely inexpensive. Let's not ask anything of people for fear of offending them and having them walk away. But Jesus obviously was not afraid of losing the crowds. He knew that following him was going to cost them, some of them their lives.

Ask nothing of others, and that's what they'll give you, nothing. We at Sts. Peter and Paul have asked nothing of most people in this congregation, and that's what they've given, nothing, not even an hour on Sunday morning for prayer, and for the majority (56% to be exact), about three dollars a week in the offering plate, hardly enough to tip the waitress or waiter at your favorite diner. By the way, a whopping 27% offer nothing at all to the congregation financially.

Kids are taking their lives in our communities, and we have nothing to offer them. In this affluent, privileged community of Riverside, kids are dying by their own hands in the grip of despair. He was Sam's friend through junior high and high school. They grew up together, made music together, spent hours in the parsonage with friends. We gave him a lift home sometimes several nights week. I knew he was drifting these past few years since high school graduation. I knew he was trouble. One time I passed by on the other side of the street when I saw him approaching because I didn't want to deal with his problems. He hung himself on Thursday morning.

That we seem to have nothing to offer them, no message of hope, no compassionate presence, no love of Jesus, no story of salvation, not even a prayer on Sunday morning is beyond me. What does this say about us, our communities, our congregations?

For everything that is worth anything there is a cost. If I buy cheap shoes, my feet are going to hurt.

If I buy an old clunker, I'll spend a lot of time in the shop. If I buy junk food, I'll be hungry in an hour or two. Give me a church where Christ has no cross, and I have nothing worth dying for. Luther claimed that "a religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing is [a religion that is] worth nothing." He followed up by saying, "There are three conversions that are necessary for a Christian: the conversion of the *heart*, the conversion of the *mind*, and the conversion of the *purse*."

"Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise... ."

I remember hearing of a Methodist congregation that decided not to baptize anyone who had not been instructed in the basics of the Christian faith. If that congregation was going to continue to baptize infants, they were going to have to start carefully instructing the parents in the meaning of the church, the meaning of the cross, the meaning of baptism, and the meaning of the faith. Why? Because we can no longer assume that people know what it means to be loved by Jesus, what it means to follow Jesus, and that they need to know that there is a cost to discipleship.

We have cheapened the faith like flavorless salt that deserves to be thrown out, but I also think we are desperately searching for something worth giving our entire lives to. We are eager to love something so true and so demanding that we would willingly, gladly, joyously lay down our lives before his throne of grace. If this is true, then we are invited to take up our cross, to have our lives shaped by our crucified and risen Lord, anywhere, anytime, and doing just about anything.