

September 4, 2022  
Luke 14:25-33

Pentecost 13  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Counting the Cost”**

“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

While it may not be “the most wonderful time of the year,” Back to School is an important season for anyone involved with education. For students, it marks the end of summer vacation and return to days filled with classes and activities, evenings of homework, and early alarms in the morning. For parents and families, it signifies the return to busy schedules, arranging transportation, and after-school care. For teachers and school staff, it means preparing classrooms, lesson plans, and activities for new and returning students. Back to school sadly marks the end of summer, but the beginning of a new and exciting season of learning and sharing.

One of my most memorable back to school seasons was my first year of university. It was a major transition for me, the first time I was living away from home and entering a school with a tradition of high academic expectations. On the first day of classes, the entire first-year class gathered in the lecture hall of the science building for a welcoming ceremony and orientation. After an enthusiastic address by the university president, the class was addressed by Dean Richard Bozarth, who to this day I believe was the inspiration for Darth Vader. Dean Bozarth was an imposing figure, a tall man with a deep voice who could strike fear into any student. Dean Bozarth approached the podium, scanned the crowd of new students, and issued a stern warning: “Look to your right and to your left. At the end of this academic year, one of you will not be here.” He went on to warn us about how challenging our first year would be, how demanding the curriculum was for even the most gifted student, and how many who had excelled in high school crashed and burned in university. If Dean Bozarth’s intention was to strike fear into the hearts of my class, he succeeded; but his warning was not for mere dramatic effect, because we would soon discover that the course expectations at Ursinus were very demanding. I worked harder that year than during any school year, spending countless hours studying in my dorm room, doing research in the library, writing papers on my portable electric typewriter, and trying to survive such required courses as Biology 101 and English Literature. Thankfully, I succeeded in surviving my first year of university studies; but Dean Bozarth’s warning proved to be true as many of my classmates did not survive that year. Some found the course work to be too challenging; others could not handle being on their own and having to discipline themselves, spending more time in the

College Union that the library. The Dean's stern warning cautioned us to consider what we were getting ourselves into, that we needed to count the cost of what would be required of us if we were to succeed in our academic careers at Ursinus.

There is a similar warning in today's Gospel lesson, where Jesus again cautions his would-be disciples as to the costs and demands required of his followers. The occasion for his warnings is when "*large crowds were travelling with him*" (14:25). Since his first public healing, the exorcism of a man possessed by "*the spirit of an unclean demon*" (4:33), Jesus had gained notoriety and was being sought by throngs of people yearning to hear his teachings and to be healed of their afflictions:

- "But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases." – 5:15.
- "They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured." – 6:18.
- "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind." – 7:21.

The Gospel of Luke is crowded with crowds who are "filled with awe" (5:26) at Jesus' words and deeds. Jesus is a captivating teacher and wonder-worker, acclaimed and followed by thousands. "*What God is doing in Jesus is nothing short of spectacular.*" (Carolyn J. Sharp).

Many would be thrilled to have so many people following them and seeking out their wisdom and healing abilities; but instead of welcoming the crowds and encouraging them to continue to follow him, Jesus offers a stern warning to those who would seek to follow him. His words are not meant to criticize them for their enthusiasm, but to urge persons who are seeking to be Jesus' followers to consider first the demands of discipleship, the danger that many would-be disciples will fail to meet the conditions for true discipleship. As he continues his journey to Jerusalem knowing that he faces martyrdom in the holy city, his followers must be prepared to leave everything behind and make their commitment to Jesus as complete and all-consuming as Jesus' devotion to his mission.

- "Rather than trying to lure the unsuspecting into unconsidered commitments, Jesus warns the crowd in advance that the way of discipleship will not be easy. The three conditions laid down in this sequence concern renouncing family ties that would prevent one from becoming a disciple, bearing one's cross, and forsaking possessions." – Alan Culpepper.

Jesus' teaching has a literary unity built on the refrain "whoever does not ... cannot be my disciple." This device (known as an "inclusio") gathers sayings that otherwise do not belong together. Jesus' words are a response to the enthusiasm of persons who seem unaware that he is going to Jerusalem and the Cross; his words caution them to think about what they are doing and decide if they are willing to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and to Golgotha.

Jesus' first warning to the crowds is shocking: "*Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*" (14:26). Having recently returned from visiting with family I had not seen in years, I found these words quite disturbing; but before we jump to any conclusions about the apparent cruelty of Jesus' sayings, we must consider the language and context of this teaching. Jesus' saying is a form of Semitic hyperbole that exaggerates a contrast so that it can be seen more clearly (such as when he teaches that "*if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away*" – Matthew 5:30). The word "hate" (*miseo*) is also different from our English understanding and usage; it carries none of the emotion we experience in the expression "I hate you." Were that the case, then this statement would cancel all the calls to love, to care, and to nourish, especially regarding one's family found in both testaments:

- "Honour your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." – Deuteronomy 5:16.
- "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home." – John 19:26-27.
- "And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever." – 1 Timothy 5:8.

Jesus' use of "hate" does not mean anger or hostility. It indicates that if there is a conflict, one's response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over even the most sacred of human relationships. Jesus is not advocating hostility toward one's family and even one's life but is promoting a steadfast refusal to allow something less valuable to replace something more valuable. There is no duty higher than commitment to Jesus and being his disciple; "*the priority of the realm of God is pictured in the most extreme terms imaginable ... Jesus is challenging listeners to*

*embrace a singular commitment and allegiance to him.*” (John Carroll). For Jesus’ earliest followers, discipleship often required a willingness to leave home and family and to travel with minimal provisions in order to proclaim the gospel; when Peter points out that *“we have left our homes and followed you,”* Jesus responds that *“truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.”* (18:28-29). In the network of loyalties in which all people live, the claim of Christ and the gospel not only takes precedence but redefines the others.

Jesus’ second warning to this crowd of would-be followers evokes the rejection of Jesus and the suffering that awaits him in Jerusalem: *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”* (14:27). Jesus had previously stated that *“if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me”* (9:23), teaching his disciples that *“whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”* (Mark 10:43-45).

- “Therefore, each one must bear a part of the holy cross; not can it be otherwise ... We too must follow after, in order that none of the suffering of Christ may be lacking or lost, but all brought together into one. Therefore, every Christian must be aware that suffering will not fail to come.” – Martin Luther.

Jesus illustrates his teachings with two short parables that require advance assessment of available resources and capacity. He asks, *“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?”* (14:28). The second parable concerns a king who is going to wage war against another king: *“what king ... would not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?”* (14:31). A prudent person would not begin a project or enter a campaign until they are sure that they have the resources to complete it. By the same token, God has not entered into the redemptive process for humanity without being prepared to complete it, and Jesus did not set his face for Jerusalem without being prepared to face the sacrifice that would be required of him there. Therefore, no one should step forward as a disciple without being prepared to forsake everything for the sake of following Jesus.

- “Luke has crafted a brilliant paradox here: the building project is no measurable structure of clay and timber but the kingdom of God, and the battle, already underway, is being waged on no earthly battlefield. Would-be disciples must acknowledge at the outset that following Jesus will cost them everything, and they cannot know what lies ahead until they take up their cross and follow their Lord ... When facing adversity, disciples must look daily neither to kinship networks nor to some other resource or power to save them. They must look only to Jesus.” – Sharp.

Jesus’ final saying evokes the words of the beloved hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross: *“love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”* Jesus warns his would-be followers that *“none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions.”* (14:33). During a visit to a Franciscan friary on Long Island, I had a conversation with one of the brothers who explained that along with vows of chastity and obedience each friar takes a vow of poverty, forsaking all earthly possessions for the sake of their call. While few people will be required to make such a drastic choice, all of us need to consider that if a person seeks to follow Jesus, they need to understand that what is required is all you have. The verb translated “renounce” or “give up” (*apotassomai*) literally means “to say farewell to” or “to take leave of.” Possessions are defined by Jesus in the fullest sense: not merely physical objects or wealth, but *“all the holdings that entangle Jesus’ disciples in the business of securing their families’ flourishing, all the things they tend and over which they exercise managerial obligations, everything for which they plan and work and negotiate.”* (Sharp). Jesus is not teaching that we should no longer exercise faithful stewardship over all that God has entrusted to us; he is warning that things we use for our benefit and the benefit of others can become gods who are the focus of our devotion and that can possess us more than we possess them. As Luther teaches in the *Small Catechism*, our response to all that God provides us *“out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all”* is that *“I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.”*

Jesus’ call to discipleship and total commitment to following him has been lived in various ways by his followers throughout the centuries. For many, it meant experiencing the same martyrdom that he experienced on the Cross; we remember many of the saints and martyrs who gave their lives for the sake of the Gospel. In the early church, it meant a radical change in daily living:

- “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.” – Acts 2:44.
- “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.” – Acts 4:32.

Few of us will be required to give our lives for the sake of our faith, nor will we have to sell all our possessions and renounce all human relationships and connections. But this does not mean that we should not take Jesus’ warnings about the cost of discipleship seriously; for while this call is lived out by each of us in different ways, it requires of all of us a total commitment to our Lord, a faith that trusts in Christ alone and renounces all other allegiances. It means confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord and Lord alone, that *“he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.”* (Colossians 1:18). It means sharing the faith of Jesus’ first apostles who confessed that *“there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals but which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

- “The cost of discipleship is paid in many different kinds of currency. For some persons a redirection of time and energy is required, for others a change in personal relationships, a change in vocation, or a commitment of financial resources; but for each person the call to discipleship is all consuming. A complete change in priorities is required of all would-be disciples. No part-time disciples are needed. No partial commitments are accepted.” – Culpepper.

If Dean Bozarth’s intention was to scare the daylights out of that group of incoming students on my first day of university, he succeeded – at least with me. I had always been a good student and had gotten good grades, but I knew that I could not rest on my laurels or rely on past habits to succeed at this level. My four years at Ursinus were strenuous, but they prepared me well for my call to serve as a pastor and to proclaim the gospel to the congregations to which I was called. It meant putting aside plans and activities I might have desired to fulfill that which was required; it meant counting the cost and making the sacrifices necessary for the task. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ caution all who would follow Jesus that there is a cost to discipleship, but that whatever we may be required to sacrifice pales in comparison to *“the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”* (Philippians 3:8). Discipleship means following our Lord in the way of the cross, knowing that *“if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in*

*a resurrection like his.*” (Romans 6:5). The path of discipleship leads to the cross, but also to the glorious hope of resurrection and eternal life in the presence of our Lord of life and salvation, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.