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THE MONTH
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The Cost of Discipleship

Passage: Luke 14: 25-33 · Lectionary: Proper 18

The mark of a great leader is the demands he makes upon his followers. The Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi offered his men only hunger and death to free Italy. Winston Churchill told the British people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, sweat, toil, and tears" in their fight against their enemies. Jesus spoke of the necessity of total commitment -even to the point of death. He conveyed this in no uncertain terms when he said to his disciples, "You must take up your cross and follow me."

Why was he so harsh? He knew what lay ahead:

Andrew died on a cross
Simon was crucified
Bartholomew was flayed alive
James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded
The other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death
Thomas was run through with a lance
Matthias was stoned and then beheaded
Matthew was slain by the sword
Peter was crucified upside down
Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows
Philip was hanged

Only John made it through alive but he was exiled to a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

The demands that Jesus makes upon those who would follow him are extreme. Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It is a hungering after God to the point of death if need be. It shakes our foundations, topples our priorities, pits us against friend and family, and makes us strangers in this world. We sing, "What A Friend We Have in Jesus." But, we must understand that on many occasions he is not our friend but our adversary.

We learn in this text that a large crowd was traveling with Jesus. Now, in large crowds you will have many motives. Some, in this crowd, are following because they have seen Jesus feed a multitude of people and they are waiting to be fed. Some are following because they have heard of Jesus' ability to heal and they are waiting for an opportunity to approach him and be healed. Still others are following for the excitement. It is safe to say that only a few are truly committed to this itinerant preachers teaching.

Aware of their multiplicity of motives Jesus turns to the crowd and tells them what is involved in a true commitment. At this moment the crowd learns, and we also, that to follow Jesus...

I.

We must establish our priorities. Too often we allow things to stand in the way of that which we consider important. And so hobbies interest us more than our children. A job takes precedent over a marriage. And television displaces family conversations over dinner. We have the best of intentions but the priorities we know to be vital to a good and happy life never get carried out in our day to day living.

Someone has calculated how a typical life span of 70 years is spent. Listen to these surprising numbers:

Sleep.....	23 years.....	32.9%
Work.....	16 years.....	22.8%
TV.....	8 years.....	11.4%
Eating.....	6 years.....	8.6%
Travel.....	6 years.....	8.6%
Leisure.....	4.5 years.....	6.5%
Illness.....	4 years.....	5.7%
Dressing.....	2 years.....	2.8%
Religion.....	0.5 years.....	0.7%

Total.....70 years.....100%

When put in these terms we see how little a priority spiritual matters occupy in our lives. But Jesus is a demanding leader. A thousand times more demanding than any you will ever know.

Jesus said, "So, therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Possessions cannot stand between you and the Lord. Jesus went so far as to say, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own mother and father, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, he cannot be my disciple." Even something as noble as the love of family, as good and right as that is, cannot stand in the way of commitment to the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Laziness, fear, selfishness, family; nothing, can stand between us and the call to discipleship. Jesus Christ demands our obedience. Jesus is not some wishy-washy little fellow coming up to us, hat in hand, hoping to win our favor, saying softly: Please sir, may I have a word with you. He comes to us as the Lord of History and makes demands: "Take up your cross and follow me." He comes to us as one to be obeyed.

II

To follow Jesus *we must first establish our priorities* and secondly, we must count the cost. Look with me at how Jesus illustrates this point. Suppose, Jesus says, one of you wants to build a tower over your vineyard so you can keep a lookout for thieves who might want to steal your harvest. Before you build, what is the first thing you will do? Will you not, he says, first sit down and estimate how much it will cost you to build the tower? It is a rhetorical question and the answer is: "Yes! Yes, I will first count the cost." In today's language: If it doesn't pencil don't do it. You do not want to appear to be a fool by laying the foundation, running out of money, abandoning the project, and becoming the laughing stock of the community.

When Jesus told this story he was on his way to Jerusalem. All around him the crowds followed; they thinking they were on their way to an empire; he knowing the path lead to a cross. What a contrast. I used to think that the crowds in the Bible followed Jesus because he was so wonderful. I later learned the tragic truth. So many followed for terribly shallow reasons; what they must then do, and so us, is sit down and take stock. Do we have the stamina to go the distance even if the finish line is death itself? That's the heart of the matter. Jesus wants the crowd to answer that question—each and every person must personally respond to that question.

Don't let it be said of you Beloved: you began to build, but he was not able to finish. She followed the teacher but she did not learn the lesson. He followed the Lord but he did not carry his cross. And that brings us to the third point.

III

In order to follow Jesus *we must establish our priorities; we must count the cost* and we must be willing to pay the price. In no uncertain terms Jesus told the crowd, "Any of you who is not willing to give up everything cannot be my disciple."

Let me ask you, could it be any clearer than that? Jesus spells out the extremely high cost of discipleship. It will cost all that you have.

If you should choose to follow, there is no part of life immune to that call.

Abraham gave up his Son.

Moses gave up Pharaoh's court.

Peter gave up his family and their fishing business.

Matthew gave up the lucrative profession of a tax collector.

Paul gave up his prestigious position as a Pharisee.

Now, unless you are called into full time Christian ministry you will not be asked to do as these men have done. But, none of us, clergy and laity alike, can escape the need to establish our priorities, count the cost, and pay the price.

I have often wondered what would have come of the church if Jesus' Disciples had not made those ultimate sacrifices. If they had not paid the price of discipleship with their very lives where would the church be? Geographically Christianity is the most widely diffused of all faiths, and a third of the earth's 6 billion people claim Christ as their Lord. What kind of church would we be if the 12 had put down their crosses?

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece.

But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here" the nobleman said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark"

That's a poignant story, isn't it? And it makes a very significant point about the importance of our commitment and loyalty to the church. The poet Edward Everett Hale put it like this:

I am only one,

but still I am one.

I cannot do everything,

*But still I can do something;
And because I cannot do everything*

I will not refuse to do the something I can do.

Let me ask you: What if every member of our church supported the church just as you do? What kind of church would you have? What if every single member served the church, attended the church, loved the church, shared the church, and gave to the church exactly as you do? What kind of church would you be?

Pray with me now:

Lord Jesus I have accepted you as my Personal Saviour,
Now I choose to follow you all the way as Lord.

Give me the "Faith that goes that goes
the distance, the FAITH that finishes. I accept the Grace
you offer me through the Blood of Christ and
apply it to my weaknesses, my discouragements,
my distractions, and other noises, that cause me
not to want to go all the way to death with you.

Thank you for the Precious Holy Spirit that gives me the
advantages over my weaknesses, and power
over all the works of the devil.

I am yours now and forever Lord Jesus.

Amen.