

## **Prayer of Illumination**

Come Holy Spirit! Come with the power of a great wind, to clear out the cobwebs of our hearts, or come stealthily, as close as our own breathing, to whisper your truth into the silence of our lives. However, you come, come with the power to change us that we might truly become the body of Christ in the world. Amen.

**Luke 14:25-33** Large crowds were traveling with Jesus and turning to them he said: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

"Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.

Title: The Cost of Discipleship

Text: Luke 14:25-33

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Today, we confront the strong words of Jesus calling for total commitment even at the cost of our most closely held relationships. He says, "*Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them, he said, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters —yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple!'*" Jesus is clear. Our following Christ comes with a price.

Jesus' challenge to his disciples in today's text is similar to the directive found in Matthew's gospel, where Jesus challenges Peter and his disciples by saying, "You must take up your cross and follow me." Friends, our gospels are clear that as Christ followers, we must be willing to die, and those words are hard to hear. But to be an effective preacher and true to my call, I must be willing to say that Christ calls us to die to find our true life. Yet, are we living such a calling? I wonder if there might be more to this call.

So, we begin today's passage with Jesus' assertion that there is a cost to our discipleship. These bold statements are not uncommon among leaders amid struggles with external threats. Our Jesus is not the only one who issues a challenge to his followers. A hallmark of exceptional leadership is the ability to set high expectations for followers, who must demonstrate their willingness, readiness, and determination to meet the leader's demands. For instance, the Italian freedom fighter Garibaldi offered his men nothing but hunger and death in their quest to liberate Italy; yet his followers stood resolute by his side. Or Winston Churchill's speech that famously declared to the British people that he had nothing to offer them but "blood, sweat, toil, and tears" in their struggle against Germany, yet they endured the relentless bombings.

After a rocky start, we know how Jesus' disciples followed him. After a rocky start of hiding in the Upper Room in fear for their lives, his disciples ultimately rose to this challenge, demonstrating their total commitment: Andrew died on a cross; Simon was crucified; Bartholomew was flayed alive; James (son of Zebedee) faced beheading; the other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death; Thomas was run through with a lance; Matthias was stoned and then beheaded; the sword slew Matthew; Peter was crucified upside down; Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows; Philip was hanged. Only John survived execution, but even he faced exile on a remote island in the Mediterranean.

Today's text reinforces Jesus' critical point to follow him: "There is a cost to discipleship." We must thoroughly understand that following Christ is a demanding endeavor that will challenge our communal living and, specifically, family relationships. This challenge is not easy and will test our faith. The call to discipleship is not a casual invitation to come forward "Just as I Am"; rather, it is a serious demand with a difficult cost. Our faith walk encompasses much more than a mere hour or two on Sunday mornings. Being a faithful Christ follower shakes the very foundations of our lives, upends our priorities, drives us into conflict with friends and family, and can make us feel like strangers in this world. We sing the comforting hymn "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" while holding our neighbor's hand, yet this beautiful and comforting hymn belies

the truth that we must recognize that there are many occasions where Jesus is far from being simply our friend. Jesus is much more. Jesus is a demanding leader, and to follow Him costs us, and sometimes those costs run deep. Following Christ faithfully will inevitably lead to conflict. Both from those around us and, most especially, within ourselves, where we will battle spiritually, making deals and compromises with what that call to follow Jesus truly means.

Notice that at the beginning of today's text, we observe a substantial crowd following Jesus. This diverse group consists of individuals with varying motivations and intentions. The promise of food draws some after witnessing Jesus feeding a multitude; others seek healing for their ailments, while some are merely drawn to the excitement of the moment. But amidst this throng, only a handful are genuinely committed to embracing the teachings of this itinerant, raggamuffin preacher. As they travel alongside him, Jesus turns to the crowd and lays out the demanding requirements of steadfast commitment to follow him. His message is directed not just at them, but also at us, challenging each of us to grapple with our own journey of following Jesus. So, I ask us today: "What does it truly cost us at FPC to be a Christ follower?"

One thing about the interim time and my work with the Transition Team is that we listen and discover what we see and hear that being a Christ follower means for us as a community of faith. The Church Assessment Tool (CAT) survey is just one of the tools we, as a Transition Team, are using to listen for Jesus' call for us at FPC; the Transition Team is also sensing an unwavering curiosity and commitment to establishing our priorities through demographic data, finance and worship data, and our upcoming listening sessions. These will be compiled into a formal document called a Mission Study.

At the heart of our work as a Transition Team and as a church in this Interim Time is putting Christ at the center of our lives—our decisions, possessions, and relationships. We seek to affirm that we view Him as the ultimate priority. Yet, let's be realistic. If we are ruthlessly honest with ourselves, we often allow distractions to impede this commitment. Despite our best intentions, the priorities of following Christ can falter in our everyday lives. Pressures from all sides can lead us to backslide in our relationship with him, but we must remain resolute in our commitment to overcoming these challenges.

Jesus asserts that true discipleship requires significant sacrifices, as indicated in the scriptures. For instance, he emphasizes that anyone who wishes to follow him must be willing to "renounce all" (Luke 14:33). Moreover, Jesus challenges followers to prioritize their commitment to him, even above familial ties. He states, "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" (Luke 14:26). Some of us gathered here this morning, me included, know that Jesus' call costs the relationships with our family members.

This stark declaration highlights the demanding nature of the discipleship journey. Furthermore, the call to discipleship requires individuals to negate self-interest and be prepared for challenges—symbolized by "taking up your cross" (Mark 8:34).

This metaphor suggests that following Jesus entails a profound commitment and a willingness to confront challenges. Additionally, Jesus encourages followers to assess the cost of pursuing such a calling. He shares the analogy of building a tower, suggesting that potential builders must first calculate the expenses to avoid starting a project they cannot complete (Luke 14:28). This thought process is crucial, as it reflects the importance of being mindful and prepared for the

challenges that may arise in one's spiritual journey. While the distribution of time in our lives may highlight specific priorities, the spiritual aspect, though minimal, calls for a fervent and committed response to the teachings of Jesus, emphasizing the need to consider the implications of such a commitment thoughtfully.

One last thing I want us to take note of. Recall that when Jesus shared this parable, he was headed to Jerusalem. Surrounding him was a crowd that believed they were following a path to a return to Israel's control of itself, and a son of David would again be on the throne in Jerusalem. While Jesus was aware of this thinking, he knew that his journey would lead to the cross, illustrating a significant contrast in his understanding of his purpose and that of those who followed him. Initially, it might seem that the crowds followed Jesus out of admiration for his qualities, but a closer examination reveals that many were drawn for superficial reasons. This raises an important question for both them and us: Friends, are we equipped to endure the entire journey, even if it leads to the death of this place's mission and purpose? Are we willing to give it all if that is what is demanded? This is the core issue that Jesus wants the crowd to reflect upon.

I recall being told about a candidate who came onto the floor of a presbytery, where she was asked a variety of questions. The process was grueling and took hours. Finally, someone stood up and asked her, "Are you willing to go to hell for the sake of Christ?" Without missing a beat, she responded, "Yes, I am! And I am willing to take this presbytery with me!" There were no more questions.

Being a disciple of Christ requires our readiness to pay a significant price. Jesus made it clear that "Any of you who is not willing to give up everything cannot be my disciple." This bold statement highlights the significant cost associated with our discipleship, which encompasses every aspect of our lives.

Evidence of this high cost can be seen in the sacrifices made by biblical figures. Remember, Peter abandoned his family and the fishing business, Matthew left a profitable role as a tax collector, and Paul renounced his esteemed position as a Pharisee. These examples, along with others, highlight the need to prioritize and assess the sacrifices required for genuine discipleship.

Consider the impact on the church if Jesus' followers had not been willing to pay the ultimate price with their lives. What kind of church would we have today if the original twelve disciples had chosen to set down their crosses and not follow Jesus? Similarly, what would become of First Presbyterian Church if we decided to turn away from its commitments?

A wealthy nobleman in a European mountain village sought to leave a lasting legacy for his townspeople. He decided to build a church, keeping the plans and interior design hidden until the project's completion. During the grand opening, attendees admired the extraordinary beauty of the church. However, someone pointed out the lack of lamps to illuminate the interior. In response, the nobleman drew attention to the brackets in the walls. He pointed to a set of lamps, where he provided each family with one for their home. He explained that their presence with their lamp inside the church would illuminate their designated space, while their absence would leave it dark.

Reflecting on this story, consider something quite personal. What would happen if every member of the church contributed in the same manner as you do? What kind of church would be formed if every member were engaged in service, attendance, love, and outreach? These are significant

questions that prompt us to evaluate our commitments and contributions of time, resources, and talents. Friends, as Christ followers, our stewardship is 365/24/7 and comes at a tremendous cost. During this interim period, let us take the time to reflect on this cost and respond to the call for greater commitment.