

“A Tough Call”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Luke 14: 25-33

If we were asked to give a title for this passage from Luke today, we might come up with “The Cost of Discipleship.” In fact, in your pew bibles, that’s the section heading the editors used for this passage. Of course, that title has already been taken by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who used that phrase to title his famous book of 1937, only years before he was martyred in Nazi Germany. But based on what Jesus is saying in this passage, the cost of discipleship sounds fairly accurate, doesn’t it?

What does it cost? We will ask that question in different situations in life. We will ask that at the store or when browsing online for an item, and its cost will determine whether we are willing to give up a certain amount of money to acquire it. We will ask that question if we are asked to serve on a community board or volunteer for an activity, and the cost is measured in how much time we will give up or sacrifice to fulfill that commitment. We will ask that question when we are told we have a disease, an illness, or are facing surgery, and the cost is the level of physical and emotional pain we are willing to endure, with the hope and promise of restored health and wholeness.

Emilie Townes writes: *It is important to stress the notion of cost along with discipleship. This term for “cost” appears only once in the New Testament, and it is in this passage. Cost is what we give up to acquire, accomplish, maintain, or produce something. It involves a measure of sacrifice and perhaps loss or penalty in gaining something. Cost requires effort and resources* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, © 2010: 46*).

It’s one thing to consider the cost of a new home or car, or the cost of undergoing chemotherapy treatment, or the cost of serving the homeless in our community. It’s quite another thing to consider the cost of discipleship which Jesus speaks of in this passage from Luke.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor: *After careful consideration of Jesus’ harder sayings, I have to conclude that Jesus would not have made a good parish minister. So much of the job depends on making it easy for people to come to church and rewarding them to stay. Talk to any of the church growth experts and they will tell you how important it is to create a safe, caring environment where people believe their concerns will be heard and their needs will be met. The basic idea is to find out what people are looking for and to give it to them, so that they decide to stay put instead of continuing to shop for a church down the street. . .*

But if Jesus were in charge of an average congregation, I figure there would be about four people left there on Sunday mornings, and chances are those four would be fooling themselves. Jesus would greet newcomers by saying, "Are you absolutely sure you want to follow this way of life? It will take everything you have. It has to come before everything else that matters to you. Plenty of people have launched out on it without counting the cost, and as you can see, they are not here anymore. The other thing is, if you succeed – if you really do follow me – it will probably get you killed. Why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head." He is the complete opposite of the good parish minister. Far from trying to make it easier for people to follow him, he points out how hard it is (*Bread of Angels*, Cowley Publications, ©1997, 46-47).

In this passage from Luke, there are large crowds following Jesus. Many people want to learn more, experience more of what he has to say and teach. They've seen him heal the sick and speak words of wisdom which brings the law, the Torah, into a new light. "What do we have to do to be one of your disciples?" they asked. "How can we join you in your Kingdom which is to come?" The reply is not what they expected.

Jesus responds in three ways, each of which speaks to the totality required if someone is to become his follower. First, "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" (v.26). The word "hate" sounds awfully strong to us, almost contradictory to the message of love which the gospel of Luke often exudes. But the verb "hate" is not meant to be taken literally. It is used to make a clear distinction between following and not following God, even to the point of "hating" one's family. Does that mean God is demanding that we actually turn our backs on our blood relatives? As one commentator has said, "One's response to the demands of discipleship must take precedence over even the most sacred of human relationships."

Second, Jesus states: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (v.27). To carry the cross or to bear the cross of Jesus emphasizes the personal struggle which each of us must go through if we choose to follow him. And the two parables which he tells reinforce that point. To commit to being Christ's disciple requires knowledge of what the costs will be, what the difficult decisions will be, whether you are building a tower, or are a king facing a decisive battle. Jesus is telling us not to begin something which we cannot finish or fulfill to the best of our abilities. I once spoke to a young adult who had been approached about serving as an elder for the first time. He was humbled by the request, but also hesitant to commit to such a responsibility if he could not give the time and energy he knew was necessary to fulfill that commitment. It is the same with Jesus' call to carry the cross: do not

undertake something so great without comprehending the full costs involved.

Third, Jesus declares: “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions” (v.33). He sums up his call to those who would wish to become his disciples with a clear yet humbling challenge. The literal meaning of the Greek verb in verse 33 is “to bid farewell to” all one’s possessions, which makes even clearer Jesus’ point. It is not a matter of giving up your home, furnishings, and other possessions for a while, and then getting them back after you’ve served your time. Not at all. It is a matter of bidding farewell to all that you have gained in this life, with the understanding that you will never see them again. When Jesus calls on us to “hate even life itself” (v. 26), he is referring to our life on earth that includes the earthly possessions we own. Such a statement is harsh, but there is no way around it: faith and loyalty to God requires a total and lasting commitment.

So, where does that leave us? Is this passage on discipleship speaking to us 2000 years after Jesus spoke these words? It seems pretty harsh, pretty unrealistic, for our modern-day culture. But is it, really? Perhaps even more for our modern-day culture, we need to hear these challenging words of Jesus.

Barbara Brown Taylor continues: *Jesus doesn’t want us to have the wrong idea. Once you made following Jesus your first priority, everything else fell by the wayside – not because God took it away from you but because that is how the world works. As long as the world opposes those who set out to transform it, the transformers will pay a high price. No one tangles with the powers that be and gets away unscathed.*

I think that is what Jesus wants us to know. He is not threatening us. He is loving us, as usual – refusing to lie to us, refusing to make his way sound easier than it is. He wants us to know very clearly what it costs so that no one follows him under false pretenses (ibid, 48-49).

The call of God is a tough call. It is a call which insists we first think of others’ needs before our own, no matter how great or small they may be. It is a call which insists we leave behind not only our possessions and our families, but also our bitterness, our hatred, our anger, and our resentment against enemies and those who have wronged us. It is a call which insists the lowliest in our midst are the mightiest in God’s eyes. It is a call which insists that the only expectations which matter are the ones which God sets through his son, Jesus Christ.

The call to discipleship is not always full of happiness and joy, but requires a life-long commitment to follow Jesus Christ no matter what comes. I constantly ask myself whether my faith is that strong — strong enough to act on the call of Jesus. Then I am reminded of the commitment God has already made to all of humanity. “God has not entered a redemptive process without being prepared to complete it,

and Jesus did not set his face on Jerusalem without being prepared to face the sacrifice that would be required of him there” (Culpepper 292). That is what God has done for us; now are we ready to do the same for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom?

Taylor concludes in this way: *Jesus may not have made a good parish minister, but he made a very good savior, and I do not think he is through saving us yet. His best tool has always been the very thing that killed him – that cross he ended up on – the one he was carrying long before he got to Golgotha. He is always offering to share it with us, to let us get underneath it with him. Not, I think, because he wants us to suffer but because he wants us to know how alive you can feel even underneath something that heavy and how it can take your breath away to get hold of your one true necessity . . . It is not for everyone. That is clearly what he is telling us. There are not a lot of people who have what it takes to shoulder the cross, but I do not think that means the rest of us are lost. It is for the rest of us – the weak ones – that he took its weight upon himself. If we cannot help him carry it, he will carry us too. I think he just wants us not to take it for granted. I think he just wants us to know what it costs (ibid, 49-50).*

May we never take for granted the love God has shown us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God. Amen.