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Counting the Cost

Texts: St. Luke 14:25-33

Throughout the gospels we find that one of the titles most frequently applied to Jesus is “rabbi,” which is simply translated as “teacher.” But doing so loses some of the real force of the title, for while Jesus was, indeed, a teacher, he was not exactly a teacher as we now think of teachers. He didn’t give lectures, nor did he give tests, nor does it appear that he made any attempt to keep up on the scholarly literature of his day. He certainly didn’t worry about publishing. Rather, his teaching was that of a Jewish rabbi, for he taught by example, by parables, and by proverbs. This means that although he came as a prophet to announce that the kingdom of God had now appeared, he also spent a good deal of his time teaching. He spent a good deal of his time dispensing wise, proverbial advice of practical merit.

One of the examples of his proverbial teaching is in the first part of today’s Gospel lesson. Here he admonishes the disciples always to count the cost ahead of time for whatever endeavor they undertake. Pointing to the examples of a man who wants to undertake a large building project, and a king who wants to undertake a war, he notes carefully the grief, hardship and ridicule that either one of them would have to endure if he didn’t count the cost ahead of time. Anybody who doesn’t count the cost would surely find out the reality that dictates that the foolish don’t prosper in the long run, but, sooner or later, inevitably encounter disasters of their own making.

The advice is timeless, as is the case with most good proverbial advice. Not only did ancient builders and kings have to count the cost of their endeavors ahead of time, so do we.

What one of us wouldn't be considered a fool if he failed to get competitive bids, or at least an estimate, before putting an addition on his house, or if he didn't bother to count up future income before making a major expenditure that required a heavy loan?

And what fools there still seem to be among us, people who obviously didn't count the cost ahead of time and are now paying for it, people who didn't count the cost and simply cannot finish the work they started? Examples abound. I live in a neighborhood with some wonderful old houses, and the entire neighborhood shares a common enthusiasm for renovation. But there have been occasions when somebody fails to realize that old houses don't fix themselves or when somebody has started on a project he can't finish, and sadly has to sell a half-renovated house that he really wanted to live in himself.

This also happens on a much larger scale, one that has repercussions for many people. Consider simply the enthusiasm with which would-be homeowners for several years embraced dubious low interest loans without looking ahead to the time that the rate would be readjusted; think about the investors who bundled these risky loans into their portfolios. The seeds of careless greed are now being reaped as the sheaves of international financial panic. Or, consider war, ancient and modern. How often has it turned out that wars, even just wars, have not been thought out as long term projects and that have turned out quite differently than first expected?

So Jesus' advice seems truly wise in good practical rabbinical style. It is important to count the cost, and it is important to build one's projects on solid foundations. Failure to do so can rather quickly bring us to ruin.

But Jesus also says something else in this morning's lesson. While it is tied to his advice about good planning and foundations, it also goes beyond good rabbinic advice, and has foreboding apocalyptic overtones. In fact, what he says is profoundly disturbing. For he says, "if

any one comes to me without hating his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life, too, he cannot be my disciple.” That this deeply disturbing idea is tied to the advice to count the cost is evident when Jesus summarizes that advice by saying: “So in the same way, none of you can be my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions.” The point is simply that the cost of discipleship is everything. It costs one all his possessions, it even costs him father, mother, spouse, children and friends, even his own life. That is what the disciples need to plan for, and they would be making a grave mistake if they thought that following Jesus costs anything less.

One cannot blame them if they are confused. This hardly seems the sort of advice that a man who wants disciples would give. I don't know many churches looking for new members or seeking to enlist people as elders or deacons that give it. Usually they talk about how little it will cost. When the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard decided that his vocation was to make Christianity hard after all the years that the church in Europe had tried to domesticate it, he was one of the few to resist the trend to underplay the cost of faith. So it almost seems as if Jesus is discouraging the would-be disciples by pointing out how tough it will be for them. Far from being a speech that would recruit disciples, Jesus sounds like he is discouraging them.

Yet, I don't think Jesus was actually trying to discourage the disciples. I do think he was trying to warn them, though, and in that regard he was trying to tell them in all honesty that following is hard. In doing so, I think that there is both wisdom and kindness in what he says and advises. What he says reminds me of a professor I once had. This professor, a philosopher, regularly taught a course on the immensely difficult to understand German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. At the beginning of the semester he usually found his Kant course filled. Not that there were a lot of students at Princeton Seminary who were philosophically accomplished.

They had, however, come to a brand name school and many thought they might like to take “a little philosophy” so that they would in future years show that they had academic credits in speculative profundity. Perhaps, too, they wanted to show that they had survived a course with the professor in question.

He had different ideas about the class. During the first class meeting he would spend most of the class period berating them for the poor quality of their past education, harshly reminding them that it was a privilege to be reading Kant, whom most of them wouldn't be able to understand anyhow. He would then go on to point out to those among them who thought to make of themselves great successes in the church, that if worldly success were their real goal in life that they should go into a field where there was at least some real competition, like law.

Now the result of this tirade was generally that a good share of the students were thoroughly outraged by what was, indeed, thoroughly outrageous behavior. They, therefore, dropped the class before the next meeting. The professor for his part, once he noted that the numbers had been pared down to a manageable size, became all sweetness and light for the rest of the semester and gained his longstanding reputation for making difficult things accessible.

While the professor was outrageous in some pretty obvious ways, there were also some ways that he, too, was simply telling the students to count the cost, and was telling them what the cost could be. Kant is by no stretch of the imagination easy to understand; in fact, at first go, he is more difficult than just about any other philosopher. This professor intended that his students understand Kant; he had no intention of passing them if they didn't. So in this way he was actually doing those who just wanted “a little philosophy” a big favor before they got into hot water and could no longer drop the class. He was telling them what the cost was going to be by hanging out a large sign, as it were, that said “no dilettantes need apply.” He was fair to them by

giving them the cost; not only because this was going to be a rough course, but also because in studying Kant there is no such thing as “a little philosophy.” There is no borrowing or imitating philosophical profundity; it has to be one’s own or one does not have it at all.

I am not sure that this was exactly the method Jesus had in mind when he told the disciples that they had to forsake everything. Still there is some similarity. For the students who thought they wanted a little philosophy, who just wanted to look like they were intellectually profound, they were forced to realize that merely looking like they were profound wasn’t good enough, and could even have drastic results. For the disciples who think that faith is something that one plays at, and that it doesn’t require all of one’s life, they would surely come to real grief if their minds were not disabused ahead of time about what faith really requires. Faith is not something that somebody else can do for you. It can’t be done at a cool distance. Faith is not something one can do to win the approval of anybody else other than God and God’s friends. Faith is something one has to do for oneself and for God, and for the life of the world -- often despite the world. It is not something that we can parade in front of others to earn their good opinion. But that means that we have to be willing to give everything, including their good opinions.

The point is this: trying to look good, trying to simply get the approval of others will only get us so far in life with respect to what is really important. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, “the one who is afraid of men, has no fear of God. But the one who fears God, has no fear of men.” To get what is important, if what is important is the knowledge and love and service of God, well, then the cost of the venture has to be the willingness to part with the approval of others. So if we really want to excel, if we really want God as our friend more than anybody else, if we really want to be good for goodness’ sake alone, we have to make excellence, God, and

goodness our own project, and we will have to count the cost of gaining those things against possibly losing the approval of the world. What others think, what other relations we have, have to become irrelevant to us if we are ever to make our own deep commitment to any project. If we are ever going to be whole human beings and children of God, we are going to have to take faith and all of its demands on for ourselves. We have to make it our own, and we can't simply borrow it from family or friends. They can all provide support for awhile, as they do when they make their vows at an infant's baptism; nevertheless, it cannot go on forever. The infant has to grow up and make a personal commitment, he or she has to make faith their own. In doing so, the approbation of friends and family if they don't support you, or if they have lukewarm commitment themselves may be the cost of that commitment.

How high is that cost?

At first it sounds very high indeed. Perhaps it even sounds like it is inhumanly high. But Jesus' advice is not inhuman. Even though Jesus tells us that we have to be willing to forgo the benefits of certain kinds of relations in order to have other, more important kinds of relations, that we have to give up worldly relations for divine ones, that is not meant to be inhuman. In fact, it is actually meant ultimately to transform *all* our relations into divine ones. St. Augustine in preaching on this passage sixteen hundred years ago pointed this fact out by noting that "whoever wishes to prepare himself now for the life of the kingdom must not hate people, but those earthly relationships through which the present life is sustained, the temporary life that begins with earth and ends with death." In short, Augustine is saying, to prepare for the kingdom we have to give up *limiting* our relations with others to the duties of children, and natural brothers and sisters, duties which, although very important, still have their limits. We have to go beyond those limits and learn to live with others as children of God and brothers and sisters of

Christ.

Maybe that doesn't sound like much at first since we talk about being the children of God with easy and cheap sentimentality. But it is a lot, and Christ in this lesson is telling us as much. For just as Christ loved us even to the point of dying for us, so in telling us that we must bear our cross and follow his example, he is telling us what the cost of the kingdom really is. It is *everything*, and no relation can put a limit to the love that we are to bear for others, just as nothing limited Christ's love for us. That is the cost of discipleship. It is a very lot to pay. But its reward, God's own friendship and kingdom is a lot to gain, too. It is indeed nothing less than real life for the whole world.

That is, friends, the last word I have to say to you. But it is also the first one that any minister ought to say, too, and it needs to be said time and time again. Why? Because, at least as far as I can tell, *the* great problem of Christianity in middle class America is a problem of being willing to make the commitment that our Lord requires of his followers. If churches are not gaining in membership it is not because of the personality of the minister or anything like that, but because people in churches do not take the church seriously enough to put themselves out for it. Too often, rather than committing themselves to the church, they offer glib advice about what everybody else could be doing to make things better. But the only thing that will make things better is to count the cost, and to pay the whole thing.

As you make a new turn into the future of this church, remember that above all, because while a talented and imaginative minister can help you imagine what living the gospel is all about, and can demonstrate it in her life and exhort you to it in her words, whether or not this is a church of Jesus Christ, or something less challenging and a lot less rewarding is ultimately going to be a matter of the members making the commitment that life lived in God's light and love

requires.

I therefore pray that you, that your minister, that I, might be willing to pay that cost, for the life of the church and of the world itself, the real life of the world, depends upon our being willing to love that much.