

“Considering the Cost”

Grace, peace and mercy are yours from our God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was ordained in 1988 the Church Growth Movement was pretty much at its peak. For years leaders in the church had noticed the declining membership of churches, particularly mainline churches, and became concerned about the number of people who did not belong to or attend a church.

Many who shared this concern began a major effort to increase church membership. They suggested things like fixing up the nursery to attract people with small children, paving parking lots so people would have to walk in the mud and painting the church because a building that shows a lack of care is off-putting to many people. These things sound really obvious now but they were new news to churches that had never had to think about such things before.

After all those years this movement is still going strong. I received two emails just this week inviting me to attend a conference that, among other things, will cover topics like: Digital Messaging for a New Generation, Creating Irresistible Young Adult and Kids Ministry, Leveraging Creativity to Elevate Your Church's Impact, Building a Worship Team That Transforms The Atmosphere and Building Guest-Centric Volunteer Teams.

A lot of this seems like common sense. Of course we want to make a good first impression to first time guests. But some have gone to extremes as they've tried eliminate anything that makes people uncomfortable. Some say taking churches shouldn't take a strong stand on moral or controversial issues because it makes for less rapid growth. Many churches have eliminated the corporate confession of sins because they say it sends a negative message and makes people feel bad about themselves. And when asked why their church didn't display a cross in the sanctuary one pastor said it was because crosses are distracting and simply got in the way.

In our Gospel lesson this morning we read that Jesus had a large crowd of people following Him. And as the crowds pressed around Him, He said to them, *“If anyone comes to me and doesn’t hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever doesn’t bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.”*

Can you imagine what a church growth consultant would say to Jesus? “Come on, Jesus, you can’t talk like that! You need to tone it down a bit, be more tactful. You’ll never retain followers if you keep saying things like that. You’re just to going drive them away.”

Quite honestly I can see why someone might say that. It isn’t just first time guests who are offended by talk like this. You and I are, too. What can Jesus’ possibly mean? Carry your cross? Hate your family? Isn’t there’s too much of that sort of thing going on already? How can Jesus encourage that?

It’s important to understand the context in which Jesus spoke these words. Large crowds had been responding to His message and actions of faith, grace, mercy and love. People were saying, “Yes, Jesus, that’s what we want. We’ll give ourselves to you. Wherever you go, we’ll follow.”

And Jesus’ closest disciples were probably excited about that. Look at all the new members who want to join us. Get out the membership certificates and let’s get them signed up. That’ll show those who don’t agree with Jesus that what He – and we – are doing is right.

But Jesus tempered the enthusiasm of those who would quickly align themselves with Him by saying that being a disciple might actually be very costly. He slowed down the quick conversions with a dash of cold reality, telling of the dangers and pain they would likely face.

The same kind of thing happened in the early day of the Peace Corps. Many joined the Peace Corps because they were moved to help people in poor, struggling countries. But when they found out they had to learn a new language, spend several weeks in training and commit themselves to at least two years in a desolate and impoverished land, doing without most of the

comforts they had known all their lives, many changed their minds.

If anyone knew about the pain of discipleship it was Jesus – especially right then. He had set His face toward Jerusalem for what He knew would be His last days before His death. He knew the pain and humiliation that was coming as He went to the cross for our sin. So He was trying to tell, trying to warn, His followers that the Christian life is not just a victory march or a celebration parade. He was telling them that faith was not just good fellowship with friendly folks or just a moment of inspiration and a new insight into God. His disciple must be willing to pay a price. And it might very well be a high price.

Many years ago Pastor Wilbur Rees, wrote a short devotional book about the modern disciple titled *\$3.00 worth Of God*. He writes with biting sarcasm: “I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please – Not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. – I don’t want enough of him to make me love a black man or pick beets with a migrant. – I want ecstasy, not transformation. – I want the warmth of the womb not a new birth. – I want about a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. – I’d like to buy \$3 worth of God, please. – How much of God do you want?”

I think that’s the question Jesus is asking us. How much of God do you want? When He says you have to hate your father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters and even your own life to be His disciple He doesn’t mean hate in the way we normally think. Jesus’ was saying that you must be willing to set difficult priorities as His disciple. He meant that every other relationships must take second place to their relationship with the Lord. He must be the number one priority of the disciple.

This sounds pretty unreasonable. But people are willing to do this all the time for many things in life. Robert Russell tells the about the huge college basketball rivalry between the University of Louisville and the University of Kentucky. He says that at one of the “Dream Games” between the two schools, an elderly woman was sitting alone with an empty seat next to her. Someone approached her and said, “Ma’am, I have rarely seen an empty seat in Rupp Arena,

let alone at a Dream Game. Whose seat is this?" The woman responded that she and her late husband had been season ticket holders for twenty-eight years, and the seat had belonged to him." So the man asked "Couldn't you find a friend or relative to come to the game with you?" And she replied. "Are you kidding? They're all at his funeral."

Okay, that probably didn't happen. But how many Christians don't give a thought to doing other things rather than spending time in worship or Bible study? How many of us can't seem to find time in our day for devotions or to pray? But how many of us have plenty of time to do other things that we say are so important but our relationship with God can be so easily taken for granted?

The story Jesus tells about counting the cost of something before committing to it reminds us that there's a cost to following Him and that it's good to regularly evaluate if we are prioritizing things right or not. God asks us to do this because He knows how important it is to be reminded that we are a different people. The world is doing everything it can to pull us away from Him each day. But God knows that apart from Him we will only find darkness and death. We need to regularly ask God to help us get and keep our priorities in order.

Once a chicken and a pig took a trip together. After many miles and many hours on the road, they got hungry. Finally, the sharp-eyed chicken spotted a restaurant. Approaching the door they read a sign which said, "Ham and Eggs: Our Specialty!" "Hold it!" the pig shouted. "What's the matter?" asked the chicken. The pig replied, "Plenty. All they want from you is a little compromise. They are asking me for total commitment!"

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." That's not just a little compromise, that's and all in" commitment. We never know where our Christian faith will take us or what will be asked of us. For Bonhoeffer it meant years in a Nazi Concentration Camp and a hangman's noose shortly before the end of WW2. I would guess that's not what's in store for any of us here, but you never know.

People will often say that the church needs more members. I think Jesus is saying in this

Gospel lesson that the church doesn't need more members. The church isn't some sort of social club where you pay your dues and show up to enjoy time with other like-minded people. We, you and me, are the church, the body of Christ. You and I are those who have been brought into relationship with the living God who created us, who died for us and who lives in and with us.

Today Jesus is telling us that, as His disciples, we are to struggle with His call to follow Him not just when it's easy or convenient but especially when it's difficult and uncomfortable. Because that's just what Jesus did for us. He was committed to us and to our need and that's why He died for us. His commitment to us has given us the sure and certain hope of eternal life.

God has given us faith. And that faith will get us from here to heaven. And He asks us to follow Him, to commit ourselves to Him because life this side of heaven is a battlefield. The world, our flesh and the devil himself would like nothing more than to make us complacent about the spiritual welfare we face each day.

As His disciples we are to count the cost, to realize that there will always be a price to pay when we make our life of faith the first priority. But when we do we will find that we've really never lost anything. In fact, we will gain more than we could ever imagine. Amen.