

September 5, 2004
Luke 14:25-35
Rev. Kenneth C. Green

“Life Savings or Spare Change?”

Early this summer, while Tassie and I were out of the country, we received an urgent telephone call at our hotel. Our house had flooded. The good news is that it flooded from the inside with nice, clean water. The bad news is that clean or not, it turns out that 10,000 gallons of water—guided only by gravity—from the second floor doesn't do good things to your ceilings or walls or floors. The frustration was not that we have yet to return to our home, the frustration around the experience really was how long it took to get someone into our home to work on it. You might remember, in the middle of June, there was some significant flooding in central Indiana and every water restoration contractor around was swamped with work. But the availability wasn't the only problem. You see, work doesn't begin on a project like that until the insurance adjustor and the contractor and owners can all agree on the extent of the damage, what was caused by this event, how to approach the repair, essentially what is the scope of the work. We had to all agree, down to the smallest detail: this door frame, but not that door frame ... It was surprising, the level of detail we got into. But it makes sense. They had to count the cost, before they began. That makes sense. Consider in advance what you're getting into.

That is precisely what Jesus is asking of the crowds who were following him, in the lectionary text I just read for you. Have you counted the cost? Are you ready for this? Do you really know what you're getting into? Will you follow me? It seems reasonable enough, but the text sounds pretty extreme. So, those of you who've put your finger in the text, you're welcome to follow along as we look at it a little more carefully. The passage today contains three warnings, and three illustrations that work like rules for competition. Whoever does “x” or “y” is disqualified from being my disciple, is essentially the form.

Now, I ran the hurdles in high school track and I swam competitively, and so watching the Olympics is fun for me and I enjoyed the relays. It sounds to me like that is kind of the phrasing we've got here. Imagine what someone on the blocks in the swimming relay might be thinking: “Whoever leaves the blocks before the swimmer coming in touches the wall, their team is disqualified.” Swimmers get disqualified in most Olympics. Think of the running relays, the 4 by 100 relay, or the 4 by 400. Whoever drops the baton, their team is disqualified, or, as it happened last week, whichever team does not complete the pass within the specified passing zone, that team is disqualified. That's the way the rules work. It doesn't matter how much they want to do it correctly, their intention, the possibility of distraction from the outside, doesn't matter. Disqualified, no medal, thanks for playing anyway. It seems sort of harsh.

Jesus' first warning comes in verse 26. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, can

not be my disciple." Does the Bible really say that? Yes. And this is one of those times I'm especially grateful that I'm Presbyterian.

Why is that? Because our reformed tradition gives us guidance on how to interpret challenging passages like this. And it's not to let us off easy. The guidance on interpreting scripture is there because we take scripture seriously. The Book of Confessions, which is part of the constitution of our denomination, has documents in it that encourage you to look at the original language, if you know it, and to consider the circumstances under which the text was written, and to interpret scripture in the light of the rest of scripture.

Now the language and the context in this passage are important. They tell us that the word we've translated "hate," is a Semitic expression that really means to "turn away from" and come to something else, or "to detach yourself from." It carries none of the extreme emotional connotations for the word "hate" that it carries in English. The parallel in Matthew's gospel, the parallel verse in 10:37 is phrased more gently and maybe more clearly. "Whoever loves father and mother more than me, is not worthy of me." It makes the same point, with less shocking language. What about the rest of scripture? The Old and the New Testament are replete with examples of the encouragement to love and care for your family and kin. In Mark 7, Jesus chastises some young theologians who were teaching that money that was pledged for religious purposes could not be redirected for the care of one's parents, if they become in need. And Jesus calls that teaching a violation of the fifth commandment, the commandment to honor your father and mother. In I Timothy, Paul commands us to take care of our families. Clearly, Jesus didn't command us to hate our loved ones, the way we would use the term today. So it's not quite as bad as it sounds. The phrasing is designed to grab our attention, and it does. But it still challenges us. Jesus is claiming the right to be first in our priorities—all of them. Fred Craddock, a remarkable preacher and Bible scholar has written that " ... in the network of the many loyalties in which all of us live, the claim of Christ and the Gospel, not only takes precedence, but, in fact, redefines the other loyalties. This can and will necessarily involve some 'detaching,' some turning away."

Jesus' second warning occurs in the 27th verse: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me, cannot be my disciple." Now there is a similar passage, earlier in Luke, in the 9th chapter, and in Mark's gospel, with maybe more familiar phrasing: "If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross daily and follow me." Now this phrasing with each disciple having his or her own individual cross to bear, has led, I think, our culture to use the phrase or to think of the phrase casually. We each have our cross to bear. Living in a hotel all summer was my cross to bear. Having my in-laws visit for three weeks, is my cross to bear. That is not your cross to bear. You see, to a Jew living in the time of Jesus, if you saw someone carrying a cross on the street, you knew that person was about to die. Now in Luke's gospel, Jesus is progressing towards the danger in Jerusalem. It is his cross, his path, his sacrifice, "the cross," Jesus is warning the crowds about.

But put yourself at the time, hearing it from Jesus mouth ... isn't it an anachronism? Do we know what cross he is talking about? Is he being prophetic? Is he foreshadowing his own death? Do they get it? Maybe they will only get it after Easter, we don't know. But Luke includes this, alongside Jesus' harsh statement about turning from family members to make a point. Choose your course carefully. Be ware of where your choice will lead. Be ready to pay the price. And to make sure we get it, he includes two short parables to illustrate: "For which of you intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise then, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him saying, 'this fellow began to build and is not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000. If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks them for the terms of peace." Jesus' parable will be recognizable to two very different groups of people. Field peasants, for one, build towers to keep watch over crops, so that animal or human intruders don't forage or damage their crops or endanger the servants. Kings, obviously a very different socioeconomic group, would not knowingly leave their subjects to be slaughtered by overwhelming force. It would make no sense. So whether you're poor or rich, weak or powerful, simple or educated, wise people count the cost of a proposed course of action before undertaking it, lest they be humiliated, or worse.

Jesus' third warning also emphasizes the need for forethought: "So, therefore none of you can become my disciple if you not give up all your possessions." We can be disqualified for possessions? We're all sunk, right? Jesus asks you to decide in advance.

"Possessions," when you think of it, is a marvelously or frighteningly inclusive term. It can include any and everything you control or own. It should be especially threatening to us, this is not a statement of judgment, but we live in a very materialistic culture. What could be more threatening to a modern American? I admit I am fond of my stuff. I found that out this summer, when some of it got soggy and some of it got rusty. It was tough. I was guilty of breaking the first life lesson I taught to my five-year-old. I've shared this at Second at Six, but I don't think I've shared it from this pulpit. When Carly was five, I taught her this phrase, because I like pithy memorable little sayings, and this resonates well with scripture. Ask her sometime, and see if she remembers it: "People are to be loved, and things are to be used, and it's best not to confuse the two."

Why then, if Jesus commands us to give up our possessions, do we own anything, if we take the Bible seriously? I own a house (though I still don't live in it). I own a car or two, furniture, clothes ... You might own houses, boats, toys ... If you take the Bible seriously, why do we own anything? Note: the passage here does not instruct you to sell everything and give it to the poor. Jesus is able to instruct people to do so. He did that to the man we call the "rich young ruler." Not here. With apologies to JFK: the point is not what your stuff could do for others, but what your stuff can do to you. It

can take your eyes off what is really important. Juan Carlos Ortiz, a marvelous Argentine pastor in the 70s and 80s in his book "Disciple", explains that Jesus probably needs houses and cars to do his work in the world today. He probably doesn't want them empty or driverless. He wants his houses with hosts and drivers with cars. He wants you to manage those things for him. But if you are truly his disciple, if you call him "Master," remember who the real owner is. Be attentive for his instructions. How is he calling you to use his house that he has asked you to occupy? How has he called you to use the cars that he has given you for your care for the time being? How has he asked you to use those for the cause of the Kingdom? It's a question of lordship that leads to questions of stewardship. Have you counted the cost? Are you ready for this? Do you really know what you're getting into? Will you follow Jesus?

As summer winds up and the busy-ness of fall is upon us, this text challenges all of us. But I think, especially in a way we might not have considered, at least not explicitly. I'm thinking of a commodity, a valuable commodity that we treat as though it were a possession, but we probably fail to consider it as such. But we act as though it were a possession. We protect it, we make decisions about work, based on it, we make decisions about play, recreation, housing ... The commodity is time. We have access to it in the same 24 hour increments, but no one knows the absolute quantity he or she gets. How many of those 24 hour increments do we have? Are you investing your time and energy for that which lasts, or for that which gets soggy or rusty? Are you investing your time and energy for the work of God's Kingdom? Or are you investing primarily in your own wants and needs, your desires, and God gets the leftovers, the spare change? If your calendar, or your schedule, were the only evidence of your priorities, what would an observer conclude is the most important thing in your life? Providing for your family? Success and recognition in your field? Raising charming, well-rounded, brilliant children? Acquiring "stuff?"

Think about it as a family, for a minute ... Think about the time you spend at soccer games, or any kind of athletic activity or scouting or music lessons or something. Think about one of those activities, and compare it to the time you spend with your children in worship or prayer, and service combined. Jesus' public caution on the cost of discipleship is strong, uncompromising, even shocking. Dietrich Bonhoffer, the great German Lutheran pastor, martyr (and who assisted in one of the documents that is in our Book of Confessions), in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* he proclaims, "when Christ calls a (person,) he bids (them) 'come and die.'" The good news, and there is good news, is that Jesus doesn't pretend it's otherwise. He is honest and upfront with those who would call him "Lord". He doesn't bait and switch. He calls us to consider in advance, have you counted the cost? Are you ready for this? Do you really know what you're getting into? Will you follow Jesus?

Okay, so I get it ... There are three warnings about counting the cost. But what does the "salt" thing have to do with them? It catches us off guard. Jesus' final illustration is unusual. And Luke's placement of that parable about salt is different than the other gospel writers. Luke placed it in an unusual position in his gospel. Why does Luke

include it here? Listen, and see if you can see a connection to the rest of the warnings: “Salt is good. But if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil, nor for the manure pile. They throw it away.” At a time when salt was less refined than it is today, over time, it could gradually lose its flavor. And then, because of the contaminants, the other stuff you were getting with your salt, it could lose its saltiness. Then it becomes not only useless, but dangerous. You couldn’t just throw it away anywhere, lest the salinity damage the soil or the fertilizer. It was not a neutral substance, but a potentially harmful one. In the same way, someone who begins the Christian life, excited ... only gradually to lose that excitement and have his or her faith fade, has not only lost the benefits of following Jesus, but they can be a deterrent to others as well. Jesus’ final illustration points out the risks of jumping into the Christian life and fizzling out before the race is over, before you pass the baton to the next generation. C.S. Lewis said that most people in what used to be Christendom have been inoculated with the gospel. They have received a bit of the dead virus in a vaccine, just enough to make sure they don’t catch the real thing.

Last week, I heard about a company in Massachusetts, a jewelry store that has begun renting rings. Imagine the proposal, for just a minute. A guy, down on one knee, “Will you marry me?” Great! She sees the ring, she’s overjoyed! She sings his praises, and hopefully says “yes.” At what point does he tell her it’s rented?

At what point does she find that out? What’s the thinking that goes behind that? “What if I never get the nerve, or maybe I’m just looking for a moment that might work?” “What if it doesn’t work out?” “What if her parents won’t have me?” The disturbing thing for me was they not only rent engagement rings, they rent wedding sets.

I’ve got a friend in Seattle, who runs the college ministry at my home church, and Mike and his wife, Sherri, offer a conference for young college students every spring. They call it *Before you Buy the Ring*. It’s a marvelous intergenerational opportunity for older couples, middle age couples and younger couples to talk to these college couples about what they might be getting into. Imagine if they called it *Before you Rent the Ring*? Who’s gonna bother with that? I can see renting an apartment before buying a house, but what about renting a ring?! What’s up with that?!

Now, ask Tassie.... I’m all for keeping my options open, as long as possible, in most areas of life. But don’t some things demand decisive commitment? After careful consideration, prayer, weighing the options, don’t we need to commit? At some point in the journey of courtship, a couple must count the cost before proceeding further, or before cutting it off. To do otherwise, would be unfair to one’s partner, and probably damaging to you both.

When it comes to discipleship, Jesus wants to protect us from ourselves. He wants us to consider in advance—Have we counted the cost? Are we ready for this? Do we really know what we’re getting into? Will we follow Jesus?

Amen.