

# Discipleship Comes with a Price

Luke 14:25-33  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 8, 2019

This sermon is entitled, "Discipleship Comes With a Price." While true, it just as easily could be, "Everything Comes With a Price." That's reflected in the nugget of wisdom that claims, "Nothing in life is every truly free." This morning we are going to explore that premise – **there is a price to pay for everything in life**. If that is indeed the case, then the question that must be always on the forefront of our hearts and minds is: **Can I afford what this is going to cost?**

Cost is what we give up to acquire, accomplish, maintain, or produce something. It necessarily involves an element of sacrifice. In short, cost requires effort and resources. The most obvious application of this deals with our finances. Do you or I (do we) really have enough money, or choose to go deeper in debt, in order to acquire something we want or even need? It is only wise to count the cost before any of us purchase a new home or car, decide to collect fine art – including pottery, travel the country or take a trip overseas, send the kids to college, maintain or renovate a home, buy season tickets, or anything else on which you or I chose to spend our hard-earned money.

The same applies to how we budget and spend our money here at the church. In order to be the good stewards we are called to be, we must always count the cost first. The Session of the church, made up of 12 ruling elders, our clerk, and myself, pay very close attention to this as we prepare the yearly church budget, which we will be doing during over the next month.

There are other areas in life beside finances, however, in which we need to count the cost before jumping in head-first. For example, when we enter into a relationship with another person there is indeed a price to pay. It will cost us in time, energy, emotion, passion, and a lot of hard work to make that relationship a healthy one. Ask anyone who is a parent and they will tell you that in addition to financial resources there is a heavy commitment of time, patience, and mental, emotional, and physical energy necessary to raise a child, let alone a teenager. Ask anyone who is an accomplished musician, singer, or artist, and they will tell you about the cost of hours and hours of practice, therefore time away from others, in order to be good at what they do. The same applies to any professional in the development of her or his skill. And just ask anyone in school the price they must pay in order to make good grades.

So I reiterate, nothing worth very much in life is truly free. Therefore, if we really want something we better count the cost before we start a project, or enter into a relationship, or join an organization, or begin a new job, or volunteer for a task, or move to a new house, or buy a high-ticket item, or whatever. For if we don't, we increase the likelihood of giving up, or failing, or adding hardship and distress in one way or another.

All of this, as we learn in today's Gospel reading from Luke 14, also applies to choosing to be a follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus. We are warned in no

uncertain terms that **faithful discipleship is not for the faint of heart. In fact, we're left with the remarkably tough question, "Can I really 'afford' to follow Jesus?" Can you? Can I?**

Jesus warns a large crowd that has gathered to hear him teach that there is a heavy price to pay in following him, and they better count the cost first to see if they're really willing to pay it. These words of warning still apply today, and especially when it comes to church leadership. On this Rally Day Sunday here at church, for example, we are reminded that counting the cost of discipleship applies to those who volunteer to be church school teachers, or as part of our Worship Connection program for our youngest children. It also applies to ruling elders, especially to those currently serving on the Session, as well as to those of you who have volunteered to serve on one of our ministry teams. It most certainly applies to the person who stands before you as your pastor. In addition to serving this community of faith, there is also a cost in serving the larger community, especially in Interfaith work, serving our denomination in my work within the presbytery, and agreeing to teaching Presbyterian Polity as an adjunct faculty at Phillips Theological Seminary this semester. And yes, it is true in that it also applies to each and every one of you who are a member of this congregation.

**Jesus uses two parables to make his point.** The first one is similar to the example I gave of renovating a house, especially if it includes building on a new room. Drawing from an example of farming life, we hear about a person who wants to build a tower in a vineyard from which the farmer can stand watch against thieves and wild animals. To begin to build such a tower and have to abandon the project when it is half completed because one has run out of money would make the builder look foolish. In that ancient culture, and to an extent today, it would cause much shame.

Similarly, the second parable, set in the context of international politics, assumes common sense on the part of a king contemplating waging war on an enemy. No king would knowingly lead an army into a slaughter or into a situation where he could be forced into an unconditional surrender. Rather, the king whose troops are outnumbered will pursue a diplomatic solution. But how many times throughout history has this advice not been taken?! What has been the real cost, for instance, in the never-ending war in Afghanistan?

The point of Jesus' two parables is that at the very least we should try to avoid disaster or obvious failure. **We are all called, then, to recognize the cost before beginning a new venture, and we should choose our course carefully, realistically, and prayerfully.** Again, as Luke rightly reminds us, this principle applies to faithful discipleship, as well. For **true discipleship does not mean simply tagging along behind Jesus** – or, in Luke's historical setting, becoming a member of the church in a rush of enthusiasm that evaporates as quickly as it appears when the going gets too demanding, or when one's interests and energy move on to something else.

**Jesus sharply confronts us with the priority of our commitments. That's why Jesus warns us to count the cost of discipleship before saying 'yes'.** Now in reality, based on his other teachings, Jesus isn't really telling us to hate the ones we love most dearly, nor give up everything we have. They call that Messianic hyperbole. Rather, it's about checking our loyalties and priorities, and putting God, and the ways of God, first. So again, we are warned to count the cost. But in order to fill the pews in many declining congregations today, **perhaps churches are making the decision to become a church member too easy. We are tempted not to challenge people, lest we chase them away.**

Our Presbyterian denomination is actually quite demanding in its list of what it means to be an active member in one of its congregations. It involves a calling to

active involvement that includes faithful stewardship, faithful worship attendance and participation in the life and ministry of the congregation, and faithful living in our daily lives. Pastors, including myself, rarely hold our collective feet to the fire. After all, a community of faith is, for the most part, a volunteer organization. And in our culture of ever-declining church membership and participation, **we don't want to push people too far in asking them to count the cost of discipleship.** But in the long run, is that really being fair by not sharing Jesus', and therefore our, expectations of what it means to be a follower of Jesus? Perhaps we need to ask, **Do you really know what you're getting yourself into? Do you realize what being an active part of a community of faith really entails?**

One biblical commentator writes, "A church that does not spell this out clearly to prospective members, or to its constituency, proves false to the good news." But another commentator states, "The irony is that churches with high standards attract people with high standards. Their integrity and commitment draw others. Soon their pews are full." Something to think about.

**Discipleship, then, is serious business and not to be entered into lightly.** "Jesus let his disciples know that the road he is walking is not without its sacrifices; to follow Jesus is not without its heavy demands; to carry the cross is not without its tangible consequences." So we must ask of ourselves, are you and I willing to endure these tangible consequences? In our better moments, knowing that what we have heard today is hard to hear, it is my hope that each of us will do so willingly.

Amen.

Resources:  
*Feasting on the Word Commentary*