

# Count the Cost

## Discipleship comes with a price

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

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**Can a person be a Christian without being a disciple?** After hearing these very demanding words about the high cost of discipleship, ascribed to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, it seems like the answer is yes. Therefore, when looking at this passage it can be interpreted to mean that **even though everyone is called to be part of the kingdom of God, that's something different than being an actual disciple of Jesus.**

Before addressing that, let's back up a bit. There's a saying, "Nothing in life is truly free". Or similarly, "Everything in life comes with a price." If there is a price to pay – physically, mentally, and/or spiritually – then the question that must be always on the forefront of our hearts, minds, and spirits 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. For cost requires effort, as well as 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 those things we want or even need? Wisdom dictates the need to count the cost before any of us purchase a new home or car, decide to collect fine art (which for me includes 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 for which you or I chose to spend our hard-earned money.

The same applies to how we budget and spend our finances here at the church. This especially applies to high ticket items, like when we recently repaired the rood, got a new boiler, put in live streaming capabilities, or now, contemplating a new and updated security system. 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 start doing later this month for next year.

There are **other areas** in life besides 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 how we spend our time, energy, emotions, passion, and all the necessary attention and effort needed 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 and patience, as well as mental, emotional, and physical energy necessary to raise a child, especially 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 **athletes**, or **any professional in the development of her or his skills**. Ask anyone in **school** the price they must pay in order to make good grades. Ask anyone involved in **social justice** issues, including the civil rights movement, especially in the 1960s. Ask any **gay, lesbian,**

**bisexual, or transgender person** who has taken the risk and overcome the fear to possibly lose everything they have by coming out so that they may more fully live into who they are created to be. Ask yourselves here at College Hill, when this community of faith took the courageous step 21 years ago, after a couple of years of careful study, of officially declaring itself a **More Light Presbyterian** congregation. That was back when it was very risky, even to its own membership, to openly declare and offer inclusion to LGBTQ+ persons, including into ordained leadership positions in the church.

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.

Now back to the matter at hand expressed in our Gospel Reading for this day from Luke 14. **All of this also applies to choosing to be a follower of the ways and teachings of Jesus, a disciple. Why should counting the cost of commitment in this regard be any different from all the other things for which we count the cost?** We are warned in no uncertain terms that **faithful discipleship is not for the faint of heart, nor is it a spectator sport**. In fact, we're left with a very serious and profound question: **Can I really 'afford' the price it will cost to truly 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. In order to make his point, Jesus shares **two parables**. The first one is similar to the example I mentioned of renovating a house, especially if it includes building on a new room. Drawing from an example of agricultural life, we hear about a person who wants to build a watchtower in a vineyard, from which the farmer can stand watch against thieves and wild animals. To begin to build such a tower and then abandon the project when it is only half completed, because one has run out of money and/or labor, would make the builder look foolish. In that ancient culture, and to an extent today, it would cause much shame and ridicule.

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 wisely pursue a diplomatic solution. But how many times throughout history has this advice not been taken?! Think of the very real cost in financial terms, and especially in human lives and ongoing trauma, from the war in Afghanistan, and in Iraq before that? Then, of course, there's Vietnam. Russia is only now counting the very high cost of invading Ukraine. Putin has rightly been subjected to much ridicule.

**The point of Jesus' two parables, at the very least, is that 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 he warns us to count the cost of discipleship before saying 'yes'. Now in reality, based on many of Jesus' other teachings, he isn't really telling us to hate, in our understanding of that word, the ones we love most dearly, nor hate life itself (which is a gracious gift of God), nor give up everything we have. That's called Messianic or prophetic hyperbole, and its purpose was to shock the listener into paying very close attention. But that doesn't get us off the hook. **All this is about checking our loyalties and priorities, and putting God – the Divine – and the ways of God, first.**

Discipleship, then, is serious business and not to be entered into lightly. It inevitably **requires our transformation, including in our relationships and priorities**. One biblical commentator writes, "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 again, we must ask of ourselves, are you and I, are we together as College Hill, willing to endure these tangible consequences? In our better, or perhaps more courageous moments, and knowing what we have heard today is hard to hear, it is my hope that each of us will be willing to do so.

So no, you don't have to leave your possessions at the church door when you exit the sanctuary today.

Amen.

Resources:

*Feasting on the Word* Commentary

Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Commentary, 1995.

*Giving Up: SALT's Commentary For Thirteenth Week After Pentecost*

Jill Duffield, *Looking into the lectionary – The cost of discipleship*, The Presbyterian Outlook