

Count the Cost

Luke 14:25-33

My first reaction to reading this scripture was: Who can be a disciple of Jesus? The cost is too great! Just when Jesus seemed all about healings and invitations to dinner, he stunned us with words that shock in their directness. How do the people of God choose discipleship, and what does it look like when we choose it? The question is nowhere as vivid as in Jesus' teaching about accepting all of the consequences of coming to him and following him. Three times in our passage, Jesus said that without definite decision, a person cannot be his disciple. First, he required a person to hate parents, spouse, children, siblings, and even one's own life. Second, he commanded carrying the cross and following him. Third, he demanded the giving up of all possessions.

In light of Jesus' previous instructions in Luke, his word should not strike us as a bolt from the blue. After all, it resonates with Jesus' instruction where he exclaimed, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" The divisions he described were in the most significant institution in the lives of his audience, the household. He spoke of a household divided between father and son, daughter and mother, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. The instrumental bonds that form the basis of their communal lives and social order would be rent asunder by the radical faith that Jesus proclaimed. His is not a faith comfortable with familiar patterns of "family values," for it requires a commitment from us that surpasses even that which we have for those most dear to us.

According to Luke's Gospel, family is reconfigured our faith. This reminds us of that time when sought by his mother and siblings, Jesus redefined family, not as those with whom we share bloodlines, but as those who "hear the word of God and do it"

(8:21). Discipleship moves us beyond comfortable kinship ties to forge new relationships among those commonly committed to Christ, who become to us new family. **Rodney S. Sadler Jr.**

So how do we understand this passage? The word "hate" punctures our pious romanticism. Does discipleship really require one to "hate" parents, spouse, children, siblings, even one's own life? "Hate" may be hyperbole, but it does not underestimate the costs of discipleship. Life meets almost everyone with choices that are emotionally costly. In ordinary circumstances, it mostly works out. However, when Jesus used the word "hate" in the same sentence with parent, spouse, child, he raised the stake. He was not speaking about cold abstractions.

The truth is we can love more than one person, one congregation, one circle of friends at a time. There is enough for parent, spouse, children, siblings, even ourselves, and it all balances out well enough; but sometimes it does not balance. A father becomes ill and dependent on his son; duty may require some sacrifice of attention or resources, and what ordinarily would go to spouse or child is diverted to parent. A mother with three children finds her time and energy consumed by the needs of a severely autistic child; what belongs to the other two has been nearly used up. The rural physician finds that needy patients consume time she needs to devote to her marriage. Conflicts of loyalty can be heartrending.

It is not only family members who compete for our affection and dutiful attention. Along with family, we love our city, our country, our flag, our church, our Lord. Usually we can keep us various loyalties and obligations in balance, but sometimes interests come into conflict. Should we salute the flag and keep the mouth shut? Salute the flag and, when required by a conscience shaped by Lord and church, name the sins? Conform to a church or denominational rule or question it?

Discipleship goes a step further than being a responsible human being. I am not saying discipleship is always in conflict with our other allegiances, but sometimes it

is, and requires us to reorder our duties and affections that might normally claim first place. Jesus did not say it would not hurt. When loyalties compete, they need to be sorted out according to some priority. For those of us who hear a call to discipleship, Jesus himself becomes our sorting principle. Jesus, the embodiment of self-offering love, of mercy and compassion, is our "true north."

Our scripture offer examples of situations that require seriously calculating the costs of undertaking a project that will be costly, whether to the treasury or to the heart. So I must give advance warning: discipleship adds to ordinary life another potential conflict of loyalties. Luke's text begins with hard words and ends with hard words: "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions" (v. 33). Luke tells us that Jesus is speaking to "large crowds." Was Jesus trying to winnow the circle of people who would become attached to him and his cause, warning away those who could not bear the heat? Was he trying to toughen the resolve of those who would stick with him? Were his words meant to be literal instructions for those few who would accompany him through the coming conflict? Were they meant equally literally for us?

Maybe. The possibility should at least be carefully pondered. We might understand this challenge as literal and even life-saving wisdom for anyone who has become consumed with possessions. Sometimes the health of the soul may require a radical divestiture. However, maybe it should not always be understood as a literal command. If my spouse and I own a home jointly, should I insist on giving it away as a demonstration of spiritual athleticism, even though he is reluctant? Should I transfer ownership to him so loss of the liquidated assets will not deprive him (or me) of a home? Would it be just and honorable to give away all possessions if it should mean becoming a ward of the state or a beggar on the street? We can pose all sorts of objections to deliberately becoming dependent on the mercy (and pocketbook) of others when it is possible to provide for ourselves.

It seems important that we take Jesus' exhortation with utter seriousness. Certainly it means at least that disciples should travel lightly, not unduly encumbered by acquiring, hoarding, or guarding our possessions. Certainly it must also mean that, when interests come into conflict, discipleship takes precedence over security.

Ronald P. Byars

We need to count the cost of discipleship. Cost means what we give up to acquire, accomplish, maintain, or produce something. It involves a measure of sacrifice and perhaps loss or penalty in gaining something. Cost requires effort and resources.

But discipleship is also a process. This takes time and involves both false starts and modest successes, as we grow in our faith journeys to live into the fullness of our humanity and dare to begin to live the holiness that resides in each of us. As disciples, we learn to face life's challenges and joys with a spirit of love, hope, faith, and peace that leads us to an ever deeper spirituality and life of witness.

In the process of becoming living disciples, we must, as Jesus states, also learn to give up all of our possessions—our need to acquire, our yearning for success, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices and hatreds, and more—and follow the way of Jesus, as we place ourselves on an ever-treading potter's wheel to examine our thoughts, words, and actions. If we don't count the cost our possessions can keep us further and further away from the Christlike walk to which Jesus invites us in discipleship. This can include our addiction to overwork or over achieve that keeps us from nurturing our relationships with our families, friends, and God. Overwork itself becomes a possession that we can hoard through rationalizations such as, "I promise that after I am done with this project, I will not take on so much anymore." We need to step back and engage in that deep process of reflection that discipleship demands of us, to explore whether we are being followers and doers of the word or if we are measuring our lives by human yardsticks.

At the heart of discipleship is transformation. The cost of discipleship is not just becoming accumulators of new information about life and living it fully, or changing our behavior in regard to Jesus' teachings. The cost is engaging in a profoundly radical shift toward the ethics of Jesus with every fiber of our beings. We are called to live lives of complete devotion to God. As part of this transformation, the cost of discipleship means entering into an intimate relationship with God in Christ that teaches us that obedience to God is a deliberative process. This intimate relationship invites us to mature in our faith. **Emilie M. Townes**

The question for each of us is: Will you count the cost of discipleship and will you accept the cost of discipleship? The rewards are definitely worth the cost!

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