

# COUNT THE COST

Luke 14:25-35

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 4, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 14, verses 25 through 35. In this gospel lesson, Jesus forces us to count the cost of following him. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 14, beginning at verse 25, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>25</sup> Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, <sup>26</sup> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. <sup>28</sup> For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? <sup>29</sup> Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, <sup>30</sup> saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' <sup>31</sup> Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup> And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. <sup>33</sup> So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

<sup>34</sup> "Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? <sup>35</sup> It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Throughout our lives, there are many times when we must count the cost. And we count the cost for many different decisions. Our minds probably think of financial decisions first. They might be large transactions, or they might be small, but, at least for me, there is always some level of deliberation. Sometimes I spend a long time deliberating. Sometimes it's just a passing thought. But I always give some thought to it. Most people probably aren't as neurotic as I am, but I assume they still give some thought to at least most of their transactions. And there are two basic questions I ask myself when counting the cost. Actually, there are many more, but I'll just give you two. Your questions might be similar, or they might be a little bit different, but I at least consider these two questions: First, *Is it worth it?* And second, *Do I have what it takes?* And either of these questions can be a deal breaker. Sometimes a thing is worth the price, but we can't afford it. Other times we can afford it, but it might not be worth it.

When I was in college, I was on the humble side of poor. I remember standing in the grocery store counting the cost between ramen noodles and off-brand ramen noodles. That's how poor I was. So there were many things I wanted. And I could look at them and say, "Yeah, that's a fair price. But I don't have it."

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During those poor college years, my friends got me into skiing, which isn't a great activity for poor kids, but we tried to make it work. We would go in the evening when lift tickets were cheaper, but the hills were either slushy or icy. We didn't really care. I remember buying my first pair of skis. The main reason I bought them was so that I wouldn't have to pay for rentals anymore. Thirteen dollars a pop really added up. So I counted the cost. If I could find a used set for a hundred dollars, they would pay for themselves after eight uses. New skis would have been a better idea, but I couldn't afford them. So I found a very used pair on eBay for less than a hundred dollars. I used them a few times. I can't remember if I got to eight. Then one time I went off a little jump. And as I landed, the right ski snapped in half. My cheap skis were not worth it. I had counted the cost, and I had counted wrongly.

We count the cost in other ways as well. Maybe you're thinking of trying out for the basketball team or taking an advanced calculus class. You count the cost. First, *Is it worth it?* These activities are demanding. They require hard work. Is it worth it? Am I willing to put in the time? Maybe you have some videogame time you can give up, but you don't want to sacrifice family or church. But we also need to ask the other question. *Do I even have what it takes?* Maybe you don't know how to dribble a basketball. Maybe you only barely passed Algebra 1. It might seem worth it, but you might not have the skill. So we ask these two basic questions: *Is it worth it?* And, *Do I have what it takes?*

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Let's apply these two questions to this gospel lesson. Jesus tells us to count the cost of discipleship. So you want to follow Jesus. Is it worth it? And do you have what it takes?

Jesus tells us the cost. He is not a bait and switch preacher. There are no hidden fees. Jesus is honest and upfront about the cost. He doesn't want anyone to have the wrong idea.

We see this happen a few times during Jesus' ministry, where he accumulates a large following. But whenever this happens, he sees that they probably don't understand who he really is and what he's really about. So he says something to offend them and drive most of them away. He does this after the feeding of the five thousand, so that only the twelve apostles remain (John 6). And here, when great crowds accompanied him, he says, **"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple"** (15:26-27). That's the cost. Count it. It is a heavy cost.

Now I'll let you in on a secret. Jesus does not actually want you to hate your mother and father. He also does not want you to leave your wife or your children. That would be a sin. And, therefore, it would actually be the opposite of what Jesus calls you to do when you follow him. One of our clues here is that Jesus doesn't just talk about hating father, mother, wife, children, brother, and sister, but also our own lives. The point is that every person in our lives, including ourselves, must take second place to Jesus. So Jesus does not desire hate. But the point is this: Are you willing to give up these people for the sake of Christ? Are you willing to give up yourself for the sake of Christ?

This is a real question. Many Christians have lived this and even died this. For many, following Christ has meant being disowned by their parents, or it has meant their spouses leave them. For many it has even meant giving up their own lives. Are you willing to endure this in order to follow Christ? Are you willing to hate father, mother, wife, child, brother, sister, and even yourself?

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It reminds us of when the LORD commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (Gen. 22). God didn't let Isaac die, but he wanted Abraham to fear, love, and trust in him above all things. Are you willing to hate everyone in order to follow Christ?

Are you willing to bear the cross in order to follow Christ? And remember, the cross is an instrument of death. Jesus is saying that you must die for him. That's the cost. Sometimes we use the language of "bearing our cross" to mean something less than death, like if you have an illness or some other negative circumstance that holds you back. You might say, "That's my cross to bear." Now I don't mean to minimize any of those struggles, but that's not what Jesus is talking about. When Jesus talks about bearing our crosses and coming after him, he means that we must follow him into death. He's talking about martyrdom. He's talking about being murdered for the sake of our Christian faith.

Now, it turns out that not all of Jesus' disciples pay this cost. I do not personally know anyone who has been murdered for their Christian faith. But I suspect by the end of my life I will. I have told you before, and I will tell you again, that it can happen here in the United States. You might know that the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights protects the free exercise of religion. That means, at the very least, that the government will not kill you for being a Christian. But you should also know that the First Amendment only protects you if people pay attention to it. Whenever we decide to not pay attention to it, then it doesn't have any power. Many parts of the world have gone through cycles where Christianity spread and grew, perhaps even becoming the majority religion. And, yet, it often became illegal, and Christians were murdered without consequence. It has happened in many places, and it can happen anywhere.

This is simply the nature of Christianity. We may naïvely think that Jesus' focus on forgiveness would be attractive to a world consumed by sin, but it's not. And Jesus teaches this in many places. If the world hated him, it will hate us too (John 15:18). We probably think of a long, peaceful life as the norm, and martyrdom as the exception. The Bible has it the other way around. We should think of our peaceful lives as the exception, and martyrdom as the norm. That's the cost. So, are you willing to be murdered for your Christian faith? We may not really know the answer to that question until that day arrives, but if you're already thinking to yourself, *I like Christianity and all, but dying for it seems kind of extreme*, then you're already in trouble. Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple," and, "Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (15:33). Jesus doesn't want part of your devotion. He doesn't want part of your life. He wants all of it, even if that means death.

This is one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith. One on hand, salvation is free. Forgiveness is free. There is nothing you must give, there is nothing you can give in order to become God's child. But, on the other hand, as God's child, you belong to him. As someone redeemed by Jesus, you belong to him. He purchased you from sin, death, and the devil. The end result is not that you belong to yourself, but that you belong to Christ. He owns your life. That's the cost.

So ... is it worth it? Is it worth everything? Yes. Absolutely. In fact, in comparison to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, nothing else in the entire world is worth anything (Phil. 3:8).

How do we know this? Because Jesus rose from the dead. And I mean that his physical body, which had been nailed to the cross, came back to life. And we have certainty of this, because there were dozens, even hundreds of eyewitnesses who testified to seeing him in the flesh, and

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they were willing to follow Jesus into death for this faith. Jesus rose from the dead, and he lives forever as our Savior and King.

And if Jesus rose from the dead, then it is absolutely worth it to follow him into death. Because we know that following him into death is not really death. But we follow him through death and into eternal life. When someone comes to you with a sword, a gun, or even a cross, know this: there is nothing they can take from you that Jesus will not give back in the resurrection of the dead.

Belonging to Christ is a gracious thing. It does not mean that Jesus uses us for his own benefit. He does not extract value from us as a harsh master would use a slave. Rather, he always uses his authority over us to do what is good for us. He calls us to things that we may not like. That's our sinful nature rebelling against what is truly good. Jesus calls us to love him above all, because that is good for us, even if it means an early death. That's the cost, and it is most certainly worth it.

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Now for the other question: *Do I have what it takes?* The answer is a big "no." I do not have what it takes to follow Jesus in this life or into death. I love myself above all things. That is the nature of fallen and sinful humanity. I love myself above all things. Jesus calls me to renounce everything for his sake, and I can't do it.

We catch a glimpse of this in the two little parables Jesus tells. They're parables of counting the cost and what happens if we don't have enough. First, it's like building a tower. We might spend all we have laying a foundation, but then not have enough to finish. Second, it's like a king with ten-thousand men going to war against another king with twenty-thousand. That's not going to work. You've spent everything you have for nothing. If you start out building a tower, but you use up all your money on the foundation. You don't have half a tower. You have a foundation for nothing, which is the same as having nothing. And if an army of ten thousand goes against an army of twenty-thousand, you don't get half a win. You get a loss, and you retreat with something less than ten thousand men. And if I pay a hundred dollars for a bad pair of skis, and they break, I don't have a hundred dollars worth of skis. I have nothing. And if I resolve to follow Christ by my own strength, but I don't have the moral fiber to do it, I'm left with nothing. I've given up my life, and gotten nothing in return. We don't have what it takes.

This is illustrated by Jesus' disciples on the evening before his crucifixion. He was going to the cross, literally. And Jesus told them that they would all fall away. To Peter, who was the most emphatic, Jesus said, "**Before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.**" But they insisted. Peter promised to go with Jesus to the death, and the others all said the same thing (Mark 14:27-31). They had counted the cost enough to know that it was worth it, but they did not rightly count their own strength. They did not have what it takes, and neither do we.

Instead of trying to lay our own foundation, we must build our lives on the solid rock of Jesus Christ (Matt. 7:24-27). We must build it on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph. 2:20), which is the Word of God. And in this world, we face a power far greater than we are. We face "the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:11-12). I can't win. I don't have what it takes. But my only hope is Jesus Christ. He must sustain me. He must bring me through. You are weak, but your Lord is strong.

There is a prayer we use during the rite of confirmation. I don't remember noticing it at my own confirmation, probably because I thought I was pretty strong. But now it always strikes me while confirming our young people in the Christian faith. It strikes me because, right after we ask

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them to make promises before God and before the congregation, we pray for their weakness. So I'll leave you with this prayer, which is still my prayer for them, as well as for all of us, including myself:

They are weak: strengthen them with your might. They are to meet a dangerous world: guide them with your counsel. They will experience many temptations: help them to resist and overcome. In every hour of need and trial, comfort them with your Holy Spirit. Help them to watch and pray, and to seek diligently in Word and Sacrament the nourishment of your grace. May they stand strong in you and in the power of your Word, confessing before a watching world their faith in you, with the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.