

Luke 14:25-33

Psalms 139:1-18

9/4/16—Pentecost 16C

Jeremiah 18:1-11

## The Cost

Do you ever feel as though technology is evolving faster than you can keep up with it? I do. Especially after I got a smart phone. I haven't yet figured out everything it does. I don't know if I'll ever fully understand all of its settings and functions. And my phone doesn't even have a lot of apps on it.

But some phones have an app where you can enter the name and the manufacturer of a product you're interested in purchasing. And this app will tell you the price of that item at various stores. In other words, it will tell you where you can buy what you need at the lowest cost. [Phone rings.]

Uh-oh, I didn't mute my phone. Excuse me a minute. Hello? Oh hi, honey. We can get it for how much? At what store? Great! Listen, can we talk about it later? I'm a little busy right now. Thanks! [Mute phone.]

We're cost-conscious people, aren't we? We check prices. We comparison-shop. We clip coupons. We watch for sales. We love a bargain!

But most of the time, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Usually, you get what you pay for. So if you want quality, you need to count the cost. When you sign a contract, when you enter into a legal agreement, you know it's a good idea to read the fine print. If you don't read it, you don't really know what you're getting into.

In today's gospel reading, we find the words of fine print we need to read so that we know what we're getting into when we decide to follow Jesus the Christ. Of course, these cost-of-discipleship words are set in the same size type as all the other words. But these words of Jesus aren't easy to read.

As Jesus makes his way toward Jerusalem, the crowds traveling behind him are growing greater by the day. People are getting swept up and carried along with the multitude, attracted to Jesus for all manner of reasons. Some are drawn to him by what they perceive as an aura of charisma and celebrity. Many hope to see him work a miracle or two. Others are curious about his message. And the rest may think he's the one they've been waiting for: a dashing military hero who'll ride in on a big white charger and run the occupying Roman armies right out of the country.

Whatever the reason, it's easy to follow the crowd. Up to this point, no commitment's been involved. Plenty of folks, then and now, are eager to follow a Jesus who's their buddy. A Jesus who's meek and mild. A Jesus who helps them get everything they want and doesn't demand anything *of* them.

Of course they want to follow that kind of Jesus. But that's not the Jesus revealed in the gospels. The Jesus revealed in the gospels doesn't stop and say: *Look how many people are joining up. Isn't that wonderful?*

No. The Jesus revealed in the gospel tells this crowd—and tells us—what he requires of anyone who would be his disciple. Being the church of Jesus Christ is not about attracting huge numbers of uncommitted people. Being a faithful church is about doing what Jesus calls you and me to do: making disciples. But not everyone is going to sign on as a disciple, after they learn what it will cost them.

Today we hear the cost. Today this first-century crowd hears the cost. Jesus has some hard words for them. And for us. Strong words. He starts off by saying that if a person doesn't hate his or her family, that person can't be a disciple. *Excuse me,*

*Jesus? I must have misunderstood you. It sounded like you said hate.*

That word, coming from the lips of Jesus, sounds strange to our ears. But remember that when we read a passage that's difficult to understand, we need to consider it—interpret it—in the context of the whole message of Scripture.

I invite you to think about the Jesus you know. This One who asks you to love even your enemies. Could this Jesus really want you to *hate* your parents, your siblings, your spouse, even your children? Could this Jesus want you to wish them harm? My brothers and sisters, you know the answer to that question.

Another thing to keep in mind is that we're not reading these words in the original Greek of the gospel. The word our English-language Bibles translate as "hate" actually means "to love less." Jesus is teaching about priorities here. He wants you to understand that your relationship with him comes first. Family members aren't always supportive of a decision to follow Jesus. He asks you to follow anyway. To love him with an all-consuming love. To love him more than you love even those with whom you share the closest human connections.

And to love him more than you love your possessions. Again and again, Luke tells us, Jesus warns against materialism. He wants to be sure we “get it.” *You don’t need all that stuff,* Jesus tells us today. *Kiss it good-bye. Leave behind the old lifestyle that was all about acquisition and consumption. You can’t live that way and be my disciple. Following me has a price. Before you can begin, you’ve got to determine if you can pay it.*

Let’s say you’re a contractor. Let’s say you’re preparing to build an office complex. Before you dig the foundation, even before you hire the construction crew, you carefully review the plans. You look at blueprints, elevations, materials, specifications. You figure the cost of labor. Before you begin, you estimate the expense.

If you want to be in Jesus’ construction crew—in Christ’s kingdom-building crew—you need to count the cost before you start. Are you willing to leave behind all that you hold most dear—and not look back? Can you pick up a cross and carry it?

Bear a cross? That expression has been over-used. And we may not comprehend its meaning. The cross Jesus asks you to bear isn’t something that happens to you involuntarily. It isn’t

something that's thrust upon you. Your cross is not an illness or a disability or a workplace problem or a difficult relationship.

No.

The cross Jesus asks you to bear as you follow him is something you *choose* to carry. You bear it voluntarily. You bear it with intentionality. You open yourself to ridicule and mocking. You open yourself to risk and to sacrifice—for the sake of others and for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. Your life takes on a cruciform shape. Your life is shaped by the life of Jesus. You cast your lot with him.

Even before the days when Luke wrote to a faith community at a time when Christians were being persecuted—and for twenty centuries since—disciples have cast their lot with Jesus Christ. Disciples have carried the cross and followed him. Disciples have left their families behind. Disciples have left their possessions behind. Disciples have loved their Lord more than they loved their lives. Disciples have *given* their lives as a witness to their faith. From the blood of these believers, the church of Jesus Christ has taken root and grown and borne fruit.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a twentieth-century Lutheran pastor who led his church in the resistance movement against the

Third Reich. Before he was martyred, hanged in a Nazi prison yard in the final days of World War II, Bonhoeffer wrote these words: “If we refuse to take up our cross and submit to suffering and rejection at the hands of men, we forfeit our fellowship with Christ and have ceased to follow Him. But if we lose our lives in His service and carry our cross, we shall find our lives again in the fellowship of the cross with Christ.”

Jesus Christ calls you to be in fellowship with him, invites you to be in relationship with him. But he won't settle for only a part of you. He demands *all* of you. Your energy. Your intellect. Your spirit. Your heart. Your treasure. All that's dear to you. Even your life itself—if not to give it up, then to give it away. To give it to him. To give your whole self to the Potter. To surrender yourself, to yield yourself as the clay in his hands so that he can form you into the vessel he desires that you be. So that he can mold you into the follower he wills you to be.

This One we follow speaks tough words to us today. But the gospel is always good news. And, beloved, there's good news here for you and me. We can't do all this on our own, and the good news is that we don't have to. The commitment to follow Christ is made in a posture of humility, and in recognition

of our complete and utter dependence on his unfailing grace to provide the strength needed to keep that commitment.

Because one day—if he hasn't already—Christ Jesus will speak your name. Single you out. Pull you out of the crowd. Ask you to follow him. When there's no one else around—in that moment of decision—what will you answer? Will you be ready? Have you counted the cost? Are you able to give all that you have and all that you are to this One who has given *his* all? To the One who has shouldered his cross and been lifted up on it? To the One who meets you at his Table today, saying: “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, poured out for you”?

Costly. Priceless!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.