



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 13 – Proper 18 (C)

Counting the Cost

[RCL] Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Our gospel today begins with some of Jesus' most controversial words in the New Testament. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." That sounds pretty intimidating! Surely Jesus can't mean that we can't serve him without hating other people, right? That we need to hate even "life itself," the life he gave us?

Most believers – and indeed, most scholars – do not take these words literally, but instead as a part of Jesus' wider attempt in this passage to describe how discipleship works. And the good news is that hating our relatives is probably not Jesus' true instruction to us. His very next sentence sheds some light on the matter. He says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

Notice that Jesus tells us it is a two-step process to become his disciple. Step one is carrying the cross. And step two is following him. So far, so good. But then Jesus presents us with two illustrations of his meaning, and each illustration *also* has two steps. Jesus is up to something interesting here. Let's see if we can unravel his meaning.

Illustration one involves building a tower. The hypothetical person takes step one, which is laying the foundation for the tower. But he doesn't check his bank account before he breaks ground, and he runs out of money. The tower can't be finished.

Illustration two involves a king going to war. The king takes step one, which is taking his ten thousand soldiers out on the field. But he didn't find out how many troops the enemy king had, and had to give up the battle and sue for peace. The war can't be won.

Two steps. Step one is doing a hard thing: starting a massive building project or entering into a war. Step two, finishing the building or winning the war, cannot happen without an interim step: counting the cost. What is it going to take to complete this? To get the tower completed? To win the war? The missing step wrecks the whole endeavor, and we are left with a useless, half-finished building or a defeated army.

So, let's go back to Jesus' two-step process for becoming his disciple. Jesus says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Step one, then, is taking up the cross. And step two is following Jesus. But he just taught us that there is a very important interim step between those two: counting the cost.

It's very easy in the heady flush of a moving worship service or a meaningful outreach project to commit or re-commit to being a disciple of Jesus. We may eagerly take up our cross. But Jesus tells us here that we need to pause and count the cost of taking up the cross. What is it really going to demand of us to carry this cross?

It's probably going to cost quite a bit. There will be a literal cost. Being part of Christian community means pledging, tithing, or giving out of our financial means. We also tithe our talent and time, giving of our gifts and skills to serve others.

There may be relational costs. Witnessing to the gospel means standing up for justice, living in solidarity with the marginalized, risking the wrath of the powers and principalities. Often, it's way less dramatic than that. It's the interpersonal cost of naming uncomfortable truths out loud and refusing to stay silent when wrong is being done.

And of course, one of the core costs of taking up the cross is giving up our comfort and control. When we sincerely shoulder the burdens of showing up for our siblings to feed and heal and share the Good News, almost anything can happen. The Holy Spirit is not predictable or controllable. When we carry the cross, we shoulder uncertainty, knowing that we'll make mistakes and need to give up our own agendas.

If we don't count the cost, we run the risk of not being able to complete our commitment. And remember, Jesus says discipleship is first carrying the cross, and secondly, following him. So, if we don't count the cost, if we don't sit down and figure out what it is going to take to go the distance with Jesus, we may be stuck carrying the cross, stuck in step one. And we might never make it to step two, following him. Think about what it means to stay forever in the step of carrying the cross but never making it to following Jesus.

The next question is: Follow Jesus where? Into what? Well, what comes after the cross? The tomb. And then the resurrection.

We know that carrying the cross is our call to serve with courage and endurance. But we don't want to get stuck on the cross forever. All of Jesus' suffering is to a purpose, for redemption and healing and rebirth. And we want to follow Jesus through the cross, through the tomb, and into new resurrected life on the third day.

Discipleship is a two-step process, as Jesus describes it. First, the cross. Then, the following. But as he describes it to us with his illustrations, it will be costly, and we need to enter discipleship with our eyes

wide open. So, at the end of the day, it's a three-step process: cross, counting costs, and following. That fits. Most wonderful things in the Bible come in threes.

Take a moment and take stock of your life. Which of Jesus' two illustrations fits you best? Are you needing to build something? Or are you needing to defeat something?

Maybe you are called in your next season of discipleship to lay the foundation for a new ministry, a new relationship, a new season of life for you or your community. Commit to the cross, to the struggle, the effort, the need. Then count the cost. What allies, resources, prayers, and partners do you need to complete the building of this new thing? You know that Jesus will help you build that tower and complete it.

Maybe you're called to be a warrior. Commit to the cross, to the battle, to the pain, to the exertion to fight the injustice that is all around you. Then count the cost. What sacrifices, tools, armor, fellow non-violent campaigners, and witnesses do you need to muster to beat down Satan under your feet? You know Jesus will help you confront the evil powers of this world, which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, as our Baptismal Covenant states.

In either case, your next step is to follow Jesus. Carry the cross from Good Friday into Holy Saturday and finally to Easter Day. You will know yourself to be Jesus' faithful disciple: risen, healed, alive.

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," Jesus says. It *is* costly. It *is* demanding. It will require every shred of courage and fortitude we can muster. But on the third day, as we walk into the rising sun with him, reborn, wounded but whole, we will know that we would not have wanted to live—or die—any other way.

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