

“Under New Management”

Luke 14: 25-33, by Marshall Ziemann, preached 9-8-2019 at PCOC

How much does it cost you to follow Jesus?

I checked the calendar, and it was on this Sunday last year, the Sun after Labor Day, when we held a Congregational Meeting so that we could elect a Pastor Nominating Comm to search for an Associate Pastor. Thus, our task was happily accomplished in under a year, which is like some sort of Presbyterian record. We weren't rushed, our committee was just very efficient! Happy news!

Our sermon passages continue in the gospel of Luke, where Luke is continuing his pattern of having Jesus say outrageous things. This isn't hard to spot today, as we turn to Luke 14, beginning in verse 25:

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and [Jesus] turned and said to them, ²⁶ “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. ²⁷ Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with 10,000 to oppose the one who comes against him with 20,000? ³² If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. (Are you sure?)

So, at first glance, Jesus appears to tell his followers to hate their family, and then go sell all their stuff! He sounds more like a cult leader than the Prince of Peace and Lord of Lords.

However, like with most of Jesus' teachings, there is a lot more below the surface than we notice at first glance. Keeping with the pattern we have seen with most of our passages in Luke during these past few months, our first response to Jesus is often exactly what John recorded the disciples as saying, “This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?” Hate your family and sell all your stuff!

Perhaps Luke is leaving us a clue in the very first verse we read, verse 25: “Now large crowds were traveling with him.” Perhaps Jesus said these things to root out those who weren't really serious about following him, those who perhaps were following him for the wrong reasons - because he did miracles; maybe they were attracted to the sideshow.

Presbyterian author Jill Duffield writes,

“The word has gotten around. Jesus' social media platforms are exploding; the buzz about him is electric. The powerful want to get close to him. The suffering want to touch him. Everyone wants a selfie or an autograph, a souvenir or a story to share. Back then, as now, human beings are attracted to the famous, those they think are powerful, connected, to those who may have the ability to influence others on their behalf.”

“Large crowds were traveling with him.”

Perhaps Luke leaves us another clue in the verses which follow this passage, as Jesus continues:

³⁴ “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?

³⁵ It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

So, if you're worth your salt, you're going to keep following Jesus, no matter what.

The heading which most Bibles give to our passage is “The Cost of Discipleship.” (Maybe your Bible says that.) The explanation which most scholars give to Jesus' words is that he is telling his followers to count the cost of following him, because it's not always going to be a smooth ride.

He's saying that your commitment and love for him should be so strong that even the love you have for your loved ones would seem like hate, in comparison - that your love for Christ would be even stronger than your love for life itself. That's because what he is offering you is actually a new way of living life, with him, instead of yourself, at the center of it.

That is, perhaps, a central tenant of the gospel message - this Christ wants to direct your life. Christ wants you to hand over to him, the reins of your life. It's like your life gets a New Manager; it's him, not you.

For some of us, that concept, at first glance, is disturbing, even frightening. “What, does that mean I'm supposed to leave my family - become a monk, or join a convent; is that my only choice? Does trying to live with Christ at the center of my life mean I cease to be me??

Some folks have a personal story of living a hard or troubled life before they found Christ. They would honestly say there is no comparison to the life they used to live and the life they live now, with Christ at the helm. It's like night and day. Some of us have a story that is just obvious like this. We can honestly say that we hated that former life and Christ became a life preserver for us. He entered our lives and rescued us from a life not worth living! Christ found you, and you are glad to follow him as his disciple!

Other of us perhaps had a more gradual encounter with Christ. Many of us were raised in the church as kids. We've heard about following Christ since Sunday School, and we've tried our best to do just that. We don't hate our family; we don't hate our life; in fact, life has been pretty good!

But in nearly every one of Jesus' teachings, and especially in this section of Luke, Jesus is making the claim that He is different. Nobody teaches like him, nobody does miracles like him, nobody has authority like him. He claims he is different than anybody else.

Those who knew him, at first thought he was one of their own - "Why, he's Joseph the Carpenter's son, from Nazareth." As his ministry went on though, they are realizing they didn't really know him at all.

What we always have to remember when we hear Jesus teaching is that Jesus knows where he's headed - to a cross. Nobody else knows that, and even when he starts to tell his disciples that, they don't believe him. They don't want to believe it. Jesus is going to ask his disciples to change the world. They don't know that. I think by this point they knew that their lives were changing - they'd left their former lives as fishermen, tax collectors, and what-not. They didn't know that they would all, before too long, become evangelists and world travelers - taking the gospel all over their known world.

Jesus does know that he will soon be carrying his cross as he is led to Calvary. So, he tells them in verse 27:

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." We hear that, and with 20/20 hindsight we know what he's talking about. I don't think they got it yet, but he's giving them a warning: Crosses will come, too, for us, and we will have to bear them, too.

You may remember that on Good Friday, after Pilate had Jesus flogged, as Jesus was struggling to carry his cross along the Via Dolorosa, someone out of the crowd was called on to carry Jesus' cross. We know this person as Simon of Cyrene, whom Mark describes as just "a passer-by from the country." Once Simon picked up that cross, no one really knew how Simon's day was going to end. What was clear, was that Simon's future was now bound up with Jesus. Can you say the same - that your future is also bound up with Jesus?

Jesus tell them that before following him they should first count the cost. Before you build something, you add up all the expenses, Jesus says. Before kings go to war, they should count up the manpower and firepower. Before you say you'll follow him, you should know there will be a cost.

This makes me wonder - what does following Christ cost you? Have you ever asked yourself just what it's costing you to be a Christian? Has it been expensive? Has it cost you anything? An hour on Sunday morning? Some money in the plate sometimes? Is being a Christian challenging your views on how you live your life, on how you see our country, on how you react to the news?

In our consumer-driven society, sometimes people look at church in terms of what the church will provide for them - the services it offers, for you personally, or for your family, and you ask, "What am I getting out of church? What do I get back for going to church?"

When I think of this question, it makes me think of two specific things this morning. First, our Russia Mission Team will head out next Sunday to go and visit again our partner church in Gnozdovo, Russia. This week our team met for the last time. We've been discussing the importance of our personal testimonies, what being a Christian means to us. This idea of a personal story has great meaning to our Russian friends, whose faith has cost them something, for generations. We will interact with folks who have really had to count the cost of discipleship more than we ever have.

Also, today at noon we will host another New Members Class, for those interested in joining our fellowship here. What will becoming a member of Church of the Cross cost them? What does being a member here cost you?

One thing it should cost us is some peace of mind every once in a while, as the claims of the gospel cause us to examine our lives as we try to follow this Christ. It's like we saw a few weeks back with Christ's challenge of not having your possessions possess you, or the challenge of being his Ambassadors, or of believing that he is making us new. As Christians, we are under new management, so expect the new boss to have his own ideas.

Where will the Good Shepherd be taking us, taking you, as we follow him? Let's pray.