

Sermon Prepared by The Rev. Matt Rhodes for
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Forest, Virginia
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2022

(Luke 14:25-33)

Discipleship can be *challenging*. Discipleship can be *hard*. Discipleship is *costly*.

We live in a time when much of life is measured by the costs associated with it. In the best of circumstances, the cost-based decisions are for things that are *wanted*: taking a dream vacation; buying a new car; remodeling the kitchen; landscaping the yard. At the other end of the spectrum, however, many are faced with more difficult and far more costly decisions about what is *needed*: scraping together enough to pay the rent; choosing between groceries and prescriptions; figuring out how to pay to get the car running to get to the job they can't afford to lose.

We're each, you and I, faced daily with issues of cost about many things in life. But amid our decision-making process and the overall rush of life, how often do we stop and think about the cost of our *discipleship*?

As we've heard in today's Gospel, Jesus knew and was trying – *again* – to explain exactly what it would cost to follow him. But those listening really didn't seem to understand. The crowds following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem may have been blinded by their own view of what was happening and their own expectations of what was ahead. Fred Craddock wrote of three ways¹ to perceive what was taking place in this passage:

- First, this was a sort of funeral procession. Knowing as he did what was waiting for him in Jerusalem, only Jesus could truly see this because he was the only one for whom death was certainly waiting in the capital.
- Second, this was a march, one toward the conflict many were seeking as they struggled to throw off the mantle of repression and subjugation of the imperial power under which they lived. This was in the words of Craddock "Galilee versus Jerusalem, peasants versus power, laity versus clergy, Jews versus Romans, Jesus versus the establishment."
- Third, this was a parade ... a celebration only because no one was aware of the conflict and death lingering just on the margins and just out of view.

Regardless of the view of the crowd on what was truly taking place, the *happening* wasn't matched by an *understanding*. No one knew what it truly took to follow Jesus all the way into a life of committed, dedicated discipleship. So he had to put it in a way that would sink in. *If you don't hate your parents, siblings, children – even your*

¹ Fred Craddock. *Luke*, p. 181.

life – you can't follow me. If you don't give up everything you've got, you can't share in this journey.

If this passage was a song and the words of Jesus the lyrics, the refrain is something he offers three times: the refrain in verses 26, 27, and 33 of “Whoever does not ... cannot be my disciple.”²

“Hate” is a supercharged word, so let me quickly reassure you Jesus didn't mean to literally hate your family. In this context it means to dissociate or detach yourself from something, specifically meaning here the attachments of family that would come before a commitment to true, committed discipleship. The wording here is far harsher than the words of Jesus in the parallel version of this scene in Matthew's Gospel, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”³ In this version, though, Jesus uses that word – “hate” – as a way of grabbing attention.

Mission accomplished.

Think about many of the people who may have been following Jesus – fishermen, farmers, craftsmen and others with little material wealth to show for their hard work. At that point in history, in a land where much of the population had little, the ties to and support of family made it perhaps the most important thing someone could have. For many, their most important possessions were their bonds with their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, grandparents and children. When Jesus asks them to give up everything, to “hate” their family, he is truly asking them to give up *everything* – to distance themselves from everyone and everything that would distract them from discipleship.

When I received my own call to discipleship – the call to go a new direction in my personal journey – I knew it would come at a cost. It would mean giving up a good job with great colleagues in which I could use the skills I'd spent years honing. I'd have to sacrifice time with Amy and the kids to meet the demands of my new class schedule and obligations on campus. It certainly meant sacrifices for Amy who would be faced with being the sole financial support for our family for three years. It would mean directly confronting doubts lurking in the background that maybe I wasn't really qualified for this new vocation.

It's in that moment, though – the moment when those followers 2,000 years ago and me and many, many others are confronted with fear, doubt and insecurity – that *things change*. It's the moment when we, like those who work as business analysts or economic forecasters, consider the other half of the cost: the benefits of making that

² Craddock, p. 181.

³ Matthew 10:37 (NRSV).

investment. What's the reward for taking a chance and making what may very well be the riskiest decision of our lives?

For me, the benefits have been tremendous. I was able to learn amazing things from professors who are among the world leaders in their fields. I spent 11 weeks during the summer one year as a hospital chaplain, learning to balance my own emotions in difficult circumstances while offering a pastoral presence to patients and their families as they faced their own life challenges. I discovered gifts and skills within me that I had no idea were even there. And now, it's brought me home to be here with you.

For those first followers of Jesus, despite the costs they incurred – repression, separation, and in many instances, martyrdom – the benefits were more than they could possibly imagine. Spending time in the company of the incarnate God. Being tasked with helping to bring about the kingdom on earth. Learning what it means to be a disciple and part of a fellowship unlike any other they'd experienced. Leaving their tiny homeland and traveling throughout the known world, bringing thousands of people to a new life in Christ.

Here at St. Stephen's, what are the costs we incur and the benefits we receive? The costs are familiar ones: giving up free time to sing in the choir or serve as ushers or on the altar guild; standing for election to the Vestry; tending to this beautiful property in good weather and bad; giving up time to gather here as a community of love and support, a community of shared purpose and shared vision.

And the rewards? A community of believers who love this place and love each other. A church that has stood here as a beacon for generations. Fellowship and support, in times of sorrow and especially in times of joy. Folks in our community who benefit from your faithful work and the contributions of many. Families who pray together and learn together.

But perhaps there are other costs we need to think about adding on. The cost of inviting a friend or neighbor to come to church with us. The cost of thinking up new and creative ways of getting the word out to the community about this place. The cost of developing events and activities appealing to a wide range of people and a wide range of ages. The cost of making this place available more often and to more groups – making it, as it was for so many years, the center of the Forest community. The cost of reaching out to those on the margins and inviting them into the center.

And for all these costs, how would the church benefit? Put simply, *growth*. We'll find that more people are walking through these doors to see why *we* are so excited about this parish. We'll see new families with children coming to see what we have to offer for Christian formation. And when people see the amazing things we have to offer, they'll be more willing to invest: invest their time in getting involved with the choir

or as ushers or lay ministers; invest their talent in strengthening this community; invest their treasure in maintaining this sacred place for generations to come and supporting those in need beyond this sanctuary and the serpentine wall.

Jesus asked his disciples to give up *everything* if they were to truly live into the call to discipleship. He reminds them that discipleship involves a shifting of priorities, a process of self-denial – of picking up our cross – and truly and deeply following him, putting no one and nothing else ahead of the call. In the words of one of my favorite sermon-writing podcasts, “It’s not about choosing suffering; it’s about choosing meaning.”⁴ In those days it was a call to shift their focus from what was right in front of them to a kingdom they couldn’t yet see. But it was also a call to deeply consider if they were willing to sacrifice and go all the way to Jerusalem with him ... and ultimately, to the foot of the cross and beyond.

We, too, are called to shift our focus – from what *is* today to the unseen, dreamed of potential of what *can be*. We’re called to give up everything in the familiar and comfortable and take the leap of faith into the unknown and the uncomfortable needed to build the kingdom. We’re called to join hands and extend ourselves into a world where so many on the edges are forgotten and have no hand to hold. We’re called to deeply consider what true discipleship costs, and the benefit in committing to following Jesus more deeply, authentically, and actively than ever before.

Amen.

⁴ Pulpit Fiction Podcast, episode 502 for September 4, 2022.