

Rev. Mike Cole
Providence Presbyterian Church
Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 7, 2025
Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Luke 14:25-33

"Count the Cost"

Before we put our house on the market in Houston several years ago, I had an inspection done to determine what needed to be done to be sure it passed inspection. I learned that I had to lower several flower beds to expose 6" of slab. That took me back to a similar situation my father faced when getting our family home ready for sale when I was about 13.

He had the same issue back then. Too much soil had built up around the slab on the back of the house and we needed to clear almost 6" of soil. However, my father was not a do-it-halfway kinda guy. Whereas I would've cleared soil maybe three feet away from the foundation, he cleared soil 25 feet away – vitually 2/3 of our back yard. We cut and rolled the St. Augustine grass to expose the soil and then cleared up to 28 cubic yards of soil in the sweltering heat of Houston, before replacing the grass. He wanted to do the job the right way not the expedient way. Which is what Jesus was getting at in today's lesson in Luke.

As the episode opens, Jesus had just left the home of a Pharisee, where he healed a man on the Sabbath, proving that God's grace takes precedence at all times over everything else. (remember that?) As he headed for Jerusalem, huge crowds followed him. His "approval ratings" in the Gallup polls were skyrocketing. Everything seemed to be going his way (or the way the world would say ought to be his way).

Then he turned to the crowds, who hung on his every word, and said, "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." The people must have shaken their heads and cleared their ears just to be sure they heard him right. That was hardly the way to improve his image and attract more people, which may have been precisely the point. Jesus was never about the business of counting numbers. He was about the business of counting the cost.

In a culture where everything is done quick and easy, Jesus' words are bewildering. He was not about the business of making it easy for us but wanted us to know that following him is counter-cultural – it runs against the flow of society. Some churches

operate with a fast food mentality and attract large crowds. But in our gospel, great crowds seemed to Jesus not to be a sign of success but a challenge to be addressed.

He tells them that before they jump on board his boat, they had better be prepared to row. He tells them that any builder worth his salt estimates the cost of a project before beginning it. He tells them that any general worth his rank assesses the enemy's strength before going into battle. "So Therefore," he continues, "none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

That's tough talk - not exactly what you'd expect from a popular messiah. His sermon to the people that day seemed to ensure that the crowds would get smaller rather than larger. Jesus is not interested in the quantity of commitment, but in the quality of commitment he gets. Jesus wants his followers to know that following him is serious business that requires a full commitment.

Jesus uses hyperbolic (exaggerated) language to make a point of allegiance. When we follow Jesus we have to put him first. Jesus uses the word "hate" in the same way that Genesis describes Jacob as loving Rachel but "hating" Leah, meaning Jacob's preference or allegiance was to Rachel more than Leah. When we follow Jesus we have to give our allegiance to him.

Then he goes on to say that we must be willing to "carry the cross," which if we're not careful, we could gloss over because we have civilized and gentled the cross. Remember at this point in Jesus' ministry the cross was not a symbol of resurrection; it was a symbol of excruciating death for those convicted of crimes. The cross was associated with punishment and was feared. It wasn't a trinket to be worn but something to be avoided at all cost. It would be like saying that to follow Jesus you must be willing to carry the electric chair. What Jesus said would have had that same jarring effect.

Following Jesus, according to him, is costly and can be painful, even to the point of death. There is a cost of following Jesus. The two short parables Jesus tells illustrate that we need to count the cost of following Jesus.

A landowner who wants to build a tower either for storing produce to for protection has to know the cost of building the tower before starting or else risks ridicule for not finishing what she began. A king must assess his troop strength to know whether to go to battle or sue for peace. Jesus extols finishing what we start when we begin our discipleship journey.

That doesn't mean that the journey is uninterrupted or without struggles. It does mean that it's a journey worth completing. It is a journey that is not easy and that deserves deep consideration of the consequences and costs.

This passage speaks to the importance of loyalty and allegiance to Jesus over all other competing loyalties, including family, self-interest, and possessions. We, who live in this

country and enjoy such personal and religious freedom have trouble imagining a cost to following Jesus, because none of us feel threatened because of our faith. But that doesn't mean that there is no cost.

We have to be willing to give up things if we are to follow Jesus. Musicians have to sacrifice free time to master their craft. The straight-A student has to be willing to give up some things to make the Dean's list. Teachers have to sacrifice hours beyond school hours to give their students the best education possible. Military personnel have to give up some personal freedoms to protect our country.

In life, anything that is worth anything has a cost. We know that. That's why many of us are here. We're not looking for the easy way. If we were we would be anywhere but here. We are looking for something worth giving our lives to. We are seeking something so large, so demanding and true that there is a cost. The good news is that this is it!

Following Jesus is exactly what we seek – exactly what can give meaning and purpose to our lives. It costs us something to follow Him. To follow Him, we have to give up something – grudges, guilt, bigotry, racism, classism, sexism. To follow Him, we have to change. Discipleship is something worth carrying the cross for. That's good news for anyone seeking to make a difference in the world.

As Jeannine Brown, Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary says, "Salvation in Jesus is not merely a transaction. It is, at heart, a covenantal relationship. And no relationship lasts without loyal commitments and actions. Because the one who redeems us also calls us into costly discipleship, Jesus' command to "Follow me" is both gift and demand."

Even though Jesus' message seems tough, it's actually good news that by following him we can enlarge and enliven the purpose of our lives. That's why he came and died for us - to enlist us into His kingdom, where counting the cost pays big dividends - both here and in the hereafter.

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

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen