

Luke 14:25-33

This morning's gospel lesson is all about understanding the cost of discipleship, a phrase you may remember as the title of a book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

If you're not familiar with Bonhoeffer, he was a young German theologian who resisted the Nazi regime, and who was ultimately imprisoned and executed for that opposition in the closing days of World War II. He was an authentic martyr, in other words.

We'll come back to him.

Right now, let's say that a better word for "understanding" the cost of discipleship might be "calculating" or "counting." The word Luke uses for "disciples" is *mathētēs*, student or learner, which derives from the Greek root *math-*, "The mental effort needed to think something through."

When Jesus tells the crowd to do the math, he means it literally!

I have to admit this resonates with me, in a dorky kind of way. As you probably know, I work on a grant encouraging COVID vaccination in and through religious communities in Wisconsin.

Part of that work, of course, is managing the project budget. What that means when you're working on a grant for a social good such as vaccination is that you essentially make sure you're losing money at the appropriate rate. There's no investing in hopes of getting profit back down the line. You spend the money, it's gone.

If you spend it too fast, you don't get the results you want. If you spend it too slow, you have to give it back, which is not great: it means that you're not living up to your end of the bargain.

In some ways, project management hasn't changed very much over the last 2,000 years. You always have to calculate whether the money you're spending will make the project successful.

In Jesus' example, a builder assesses whether he has enough money to complete construction on a tower. In my case, it's calculating whether we have enough money to see our project through.

(On that score, all I'm going to say is I haaaate the rising cost of health insurance.)

You also have to calculate the project's chances for success. Jesus talks about a king going to war. If I do this, am I going to win, or will I just be wasting resources?

In my project, we had to decide if we had the resources to help win the battle against COVID. Honestly? We're probably maxing out what we can do. I can't faithfully say it would be worth doing it on this scale again.

Lest you think I'm wandering from the Jesus message here, let me say two things. First, the king deciding whether to go to war is a nice little look back to Luke 11, where Jesus talks about how a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand.

As Jesus says in that chapter, the kingdom of God is set against the kingdom of Satan, and friends, we know which side we want to win that battle. Planning for success is vital.

People look at me funny when I say such things, but I do believe in this battle of good over evil. I do believe that we are locked in that battle constantly in everyday life.

Now, understand. Evil isn't what you see in Hollywood horror movies. Evil is what makes innocent people suffer in the world.

And, I think, what we do in day-to-day life very much reflects our commitment to discipleship, or lack thereof. If you are not working to reduce suffering in the world, what are you doing with your life? If you're not planning how you can successfully reduce suffering in the world, what are you doing?

I say that half to set up the argument of the sermon, and half to say this is just how I think. It's why I do what I do in day-to-day life, and it leads to the second thing I wanted to tell you. There are in fact very real costs to discipleship, and we have to calculate what those costs are in our boring, mundane day-to-day lives, *because that's the life most of us live.*

If you are someone liable to be executed by a Nazi regime, please let me know after worship. I'd like to talk to you! But for most Americans, the costs of discipleship are much more subtle.

Jesus talks about having to "hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself," which is both less severe and more emphatic than it sounds.

"Hate" doesn't mean the emotion. As one of my commentaries puts it, it's about attitudes and modes of action. It means to turn away or detach from something.

Contrary to centuries of Christians pumping up the drama, then, you don't have to despise your family to be a Jesus follower. You might have to let go of them or go against their wishes, though.

Same thing with hating life—one of the wickedest ideas in all Christian tradition is the notion that true disciples have to hate themselves, hold themselves in contempt, despise any kind of joy or fun in their world. It is not required.

But sometimes, a Christian disciple needs to become a new person. Sometimes they need to become someone who is not dedicated to living a "normal" life, the life that's been planned out for them.

In my case, that means giving up on the idea of "being a success," of acquiring riches and fame and all the rest, in favor of working at meaningful jobs, jobs that help other people.

I probably make half of what my next-poorest close friend does, and maybe a fifth of what the wealthiest guy does. You know what? No complaints. I have what I need and more, and a purposeful, satisfying job.

Too often, we count the *costs* of discipleship without also reckoning with the *joys*. I got to raise my kids in a wonderful environment and I have time to be available to my family, because I rejected the rat race. Thank you, Jesus!

At the same time, there are real costs to discipleship, as Bonhoeffer knew, and Jesus emphasized. You can hear what I mean in a more literal translation of the gospel text:

Whoever comes to me and does not hate the father of his, and the mother, and the wife, and the children and the brothers and the sisters, yes, and even the life of his, cannot be my disciple...So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all the possessions of yours.

You hear the punches? "Of his, of his, of yours"? Not only are there costs to discipleship, those costs are personal: "Whoever does not carry *his own* cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

If you are going to follow Jesus, you may very well be called upon to give up your family, all your possessions, even your life. If you don't sit down and do that math ahead of time, Jesus says, *you can't be a disciple*.

Now, if you're like me, you might be wondering what the heck kind of recruiting pitch this is. Who would want to be a disciple after thinking through all those costs?

Here, it's helpful to understand the context of the scripture. Just before this passage is the story of the banquet, in which a king invites his friends to a feast. When they're no-shows, he goes out and grabs the salt of the earth to fill the tables.

That can be read as God (represented by the king) choosing the side of the poor over and against the rich. Who's going to enjoy the banquet in heaven? Not the rich folks. They're all weasels! It's the poor folk!

That seems to be a popular message, because Jesus attracts "great crowds" around him. He apparently feels the need for a reality check: look, here's what will be required of you.

Immediately after this passage we hear Jesus' warning about salt losing its flavor. Taken together, the message is pretty clear. Yes, God may have taken your side, but if you don't think carefully about what you're doing as a disciple, you'll become like old salt. You'll lose your bite and give up on the project before it's done.

On the one hand, that's just practical: disciples take on a big commitment. Think about that carefully.

On another level, it's about something entirely different. "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?" Jesus asks.

The implied answer here is of course "None of us."

But then, neither would God!

God has sat down to calculate the cost of bringing on all of humanity as disciples: people who love God, love righteousness, love justice and peace and healing.

God has gamed out the chances of success, priced it all out, and has decided it's worth it to be all in. God is willing to spend *everything* to bring humanity back to God, because we—you—are worth the cost.

And, oh by the way, that cost involves giving up his only begotten son to death. God is willing to spend *everything* because you are worthwhile.

You are worth the cost of a world without suffering.

You are worth the cost of a world without disease.

You are worth the cost of a world without death.

You are worth the cost of a world where the rich do not oppress the poor.

You are worth the cost of a world where the violent do not repress the peaceful.

You are worth the cost of a world without injustice.

You are worth the cost of a world where a woman can control her own body and her own destiny.

You are worth the cost to build a world where people can just be their own selves, without fear of judgment for who they are or who they love.

It is worth every red nickel God has to achieve that world, it is worth every resource, every friendship, every favor to call in, everything. Because God sees infinite worth in you and me and us. Because God loves you and me and us. Because God is love.

The Christian message is that God did lay it all out there, God did spend it all: he sent Jesus into the world to buy us back from pain and suffering and injustice.

And if God is willing to make that kind of investment in you, shouldn't you be willing to do the same?

You do the math.

Amen.