

“Weighing Options”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 8, 2013

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Holy Scriptures: Luke 14: 25-33

Luke 14

²⁵ Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he 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 ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 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.”

Ames, Iowa

Guideposts magazine shares a true vignette about a corn farmer in Iowa.

At the Iowa State Fair the farmer’s excellent corn took first place

for several years running.

What caught the attention of Guideposts magazine was what the farmer did afterward.

Each year he won a blue ribbon, he gave away to neighboring farmers

free bags of seed of his prize-winning corn.

Someone asked him why he did this;

wasn’t he afraid other farmers might win first place at the State Fair?

He said, *“The wind blows across my neighbors farms*

and carries seeds from their fields into my fields.

If my neighbors have bad corn, then I will have bad corn.

If my neighbors are blessed with prize winning corn, then so will I.”

This story has less to do with corn than it does with grace.

This story is a metaphor about the grace of God.

The refreshing wind of the Holy Spirit blows across the fields of our lives,

spreading far and wide the good deeds and good graces we live out.

God’s grace is freely received and freely given.

When we give away grace to our neighbors,

then the wind of God carries good grace back to us.

When we give away anything less than our best

then that, too, may return our way.

In the neighborhood in which I was raised we had a term

for this manner of living and giving:

“What goes around, comes around.”

Our brothers and sisters who practice Buddhism

might call this Karma.

All creatures are responsible for their Karma.

Did you see the bumper sticker that reads,

“I’m sorry my karma ran over your dogma.”

Thank goodness, grace is what God wills for you to have;

not to keep and hoard and hide

but to extend to your neighbors by the armload.

Our own beloved Fred Craddock wrote a commentary on Philippians

in which he defined grace as “love in action.”

God’s grace is the activity in your life

of the immortal, invisible, immeasurable, invincible love
that the Spirit of God has for you.

With this grace,

Jesus Christ invites you to follow him on the way.

With this grace,

Jesus empowers you to be transformed
and to have the power to transform one another.

With this grace,

Jesus extends to you the offer of your own cross.

Take up your cross and follow Jesus on the Way.

Come on, my friends, and get on board the God movement,

knowing full well that sometimes you will have to weigh your options
and make difficult choices daily as you answer the call to
discipleship.

The call to discipleship comes freely in grace;

the cost of discipleship, however, is not cheap.

The cost is great, and may cost your life,

yet it is the only life worth living and worth giving.

Jesus said, "*Whoever does not bear his own cross*

and come after me, cannot be my disciple."

Decatur, Georgia

An elder and I went to the hospital to visit someone

who was going through a very difficult stretch of life.

We gave her an opening in the conversation

for her to say whatever was on her mind, to express herself,

to complain or be bitter or shout to the highest heavens her pain and
grief.

If she had done so, it would have been fine.

We would have understood completely.

Instead what she said was,

*“There are people who have it so much worse than I do,
that I cannot bring myself to complain.
I am so thankful for my family’s presence
and my church’s support and my Lord’s love.”*

As we sat there beside her bedside

we knew that we were in the Master’s presence.

To be in the Master’s presence is to be included in the family of God.

Jesus spoke to his followers then and today about who is included his family:

Those who choose to answer the call to follow Jesus
and respect that there is no duty higher
than living out and into their commitment to Christ,
even when it demands a costly discipleship.

Luke 14 reads:

“Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus;

and he 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.

33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple

if you do not give up all your possessions.”

Following Jesus is tough;

here he makes it abundantly clear how tough it is.

Will you give up whomever or whatever comes between you and the holy?
Are your relationships coming between you and your connection with God?
Do your possessions possess you?

Do the things you own own you?

Do your tools and toys, telephones and trucks possess your soul?

Or can you give them up to God
and let God help you to take control
lest they control you?

What do you think:

did Jesus say this because he was trying to get rid of the large crowd,
or was he seeking to grow their souls?

Whatever his intent,

this tough teaching has had both effects over the past 20 centuries:
not all who hear the Good News choose the option of following Jesus,
and those who do have their grace spread and sown far and
wide.

Nanking, China

A friend of a friend traveled to China

to serve Christ there as a missionary.

He found his new Chinese neighbors to be responsive, welcoming,

and excited to study the Word and learn about Jesus Christ.

However, to a culture that is grounded in honoring elders

and respecting mothers and fathers,

today's passages from Luke 14 became a stumbling block
to growing the church in China.

The missionary was asked time and again by Chinese neighbors:

*“How can you expect us to follow a Savior
who does not even respect his own family?”*

The missionary responded by teaching that Jesus does, indeed,
challenge the primacy of loyalty to one’s family.

The missionary preached that Jesus is instructing his followers
and those who would consider being a Christian
the gravity, the severity of what is at stake.

To decide to follow Jesus may mean a break
with one’s own mother or father or kinfolk;
if your family thinks you will bring dishonor to them
by accepting Jesus into your life,
then, yes, this will cost you greatly,
and yet it will also free you into a new
life in Christ.

The missionary was straight with his Chinese community:

being a disciple of Christ brings great reward
yet may put you at great personal risk.

Everything else is qualified by your commitment, he said.

With this great risk there is also an amazing grace.

You risk some relationships yet gain the family of God.

So, said the missionary, consider first what you are about to decide!

Size up what the task demands!

If you were going to build a house,

you would make sure you have enough bricks before you begin.

If you were to declare war on another country,

you would make sure you had a bigger army;

otherwise when you see their troops you'll be begging for a truce.
If you were to say, "*Yes, this is the faith I choose to profess,*"
you would make sure that you are willing
to weigh and pay the cost of discipleship.
Otherwise when the heat is on and you're put to the test,
you may fall.
And even if and when you do fall away or fall short, fall apart or fall down,
know this, good people of God:
that God will always love you;
God will forgive your repentant soul;
God will continue to welcome you home, pick you up,
set you back on your feet,
and provide opportunities for you to
serve.

Consider well the consequences of saying yes to making a commitment to Christ.
Weigh your options.

Durban, South Africa

The population of Durban includes over one million Indians
from the country of India.

Durban has the most Indians in any one city outside of India.

One summer Disciples of Christ Cathy and Randall Stephens
visited a Christian Church of Indians in Durban.

Randall and Cathy spent a beautiful day with the members of the church.

They worshipped God together, ate traditional food with their fingers,
and while Randall talked with the men downstairs,
the women took Cathy upstairs.

There she tried on a Sari, and then they put a red dot on her forehead.

It was a great day.

After a while the grandfather of one of the families

and a patriarch in the congregation told them his story.

He had been raised in India as a Hindu.

One day, when he was a youth, an old missionary

-- who was serving a church in the town --

shared the story of Jesus Christ.

Not immediately, but soon thereafter

the young man decided to confess and follow Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Now, he came from a well-to-do family.

They owned businesses.

He was the eldest son and he stood first in line to inherit.

He told his father he was thinking about being a Christian.

His father told him, *"My son, if you leave Hinduism*

and embrace Christianity, it will cost you everything. You will be disinherited."

Hard, hard decision for a young person.

There was a lot weighing in the balance.

He came to the conclusion that there was only one thing to do:

embrace Christianity, take up his cross, and follow Jesus.

When his extended family found out, they went to a funeral.

The funeral was for their eldest son, even though he was very much alive.

Not only was he disinherited,

there was a casket at the funeral and it was buried deep in the ground.

He lost all wealth he might have gained.

He lost access to his own home.

He lost his family.

As Randall and Cathy listened,

the grandfather reflected on his life since that fateful day,

and observed that he and his descendants did not have an easy life.

They were struggling to make ends meet.

And yet, as he shared his faith journey with them, he said,

“If I had to do this all over again, I would do the same.”

This morning we pause to admire this Indian gentleman and his family;

we do not know their names but we can relate to their pain...and their joy.

We may admire their commitment to Jesus Christ.

We may admire their willingness to pay the cost of discipleship.

One soul placed Christ first,

and everything else fell into place.

Think back to the times in your life when you have prioritized God.

Remember when you have stood firm for your faith in Christ.

Atlanta, Georgia

As we contemplate this passage of one of the toughest sayings of Jesus of Nazareth,

a passage calling for us to consider and take on the cost of discipleship,

it slowly dawns on us that this Good News

is for a weary people.

Throughout this week the image that has stuck with me

is that we are a war-weary people.

As our nation contemplates the situation in Syria,

a nation state whose leadership is harming their own citizens,
we wait to see how the world's elected leaders will respond.

We know one thing for sure: we are tired of wars and rumors of war.

We are weary from carrying many other burdens as well.

There is hope here for a war-weary nation;

hope for a church of beautiful yet sometimes weary servants,

hope for a community of weary and bleary eyed parents,

hope for our overscheduled weary children

whose school backpacks grow increasingly
heavier;

and hope for our weary, lovely elders

who have borne their weight for so long and for
so well.

There is hope here.

There is beauty in the burden of the Cross;

there is spiritual joy in paying the cost of discipleship.

Jesus instructs us to let go of that which distracts or detracts

from our connection with God.

His call is for us to take on the spiritual disciplines,

such as prayer, scriptural studies, worship on the Sabbath, meditation,

and community service above self.

There is hope here.

We choose as church members and friends to let go of being burned out;

to take on one major project and one minor project,
and then to stop, to claim a sabbatical,
allowing one another opportunities to participate.

If you find yourself doing too much,
take a step back, breathe, and guide another to step up.
If you are sitting back and letting others do all the work and play,
come on and jump in, the water is fine!

There is hope here in the beauty of the Cross.

Take on the burden of compassion;
see the world through another soul's eyes.

Take on the burden of your vocation;
meet God at the intersection of your deep gladness and the world's deep
hunger.

Take on the joy of making a world of difference;
be open to being used by God for a holy purpose.

Recently I said the right thing at the right time to the right person.

A soul was transformed!

The experience was cosmic for both of us;
the winds of the Holy Spirit blew the seeds of grace across many fields.

I floated three feet above the ground for days and days.

Every now and then we get to be a channel for the Spirit of God,
and it feels so good, and so right, that we can't wait for the next time.

We can think with our minds to calculate the cost of discipleship.

The true test arrives when the call to serve sinks in and hits with full force.

This is when the rubber hits the road and we decide, truly decide,
that we will sacrifice our self for Christ
for the greater good, for a common cause, for a neighbor in need.

Does this sound oddly familiar?

Who has already made such a sacrifice for your soul?

There is hope here in the beauty of the Cross.

The Good News is that Jesus Christ has already given Himself for us.

On the cross on Calvary, his pain became our gain.

His risk became our redemption.

His agony became our triumph.

His fate became our faith.

His love became our grace.

Thank goodness, grace is what God wills for you to have,
not to keep and hoard and hide,
but to extend to your neighbors by the armload.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!