

Sermon Preached Sept. 9, 2007 by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr.
Proper 18 Luke 14:25-33 St. Luke's Episcopal Church

My family has made some major purchases in the past few months. We bought a house and a second car and then we had to pay a plumber to work on the house and a mechanic to work on the car. In all of these purchases, I had the experience that many of us call "sticker shock" where I really liked something but then I saw how expensive it was and quickly started looking at something else. I wonder if any of us had a sense of sticker shock this morning as we heard Jesus' words about the cost of following him. We may think that Jesus is setting the price of discipleship too high. We may be tempted to look for something different. Following Jesus is expensive, but the price is right.

We heard in the lesson from Luke that large crowds were following Jesus. Jesus turns to them and says words to the effect that "if you do not hate your family and even life itself, you are not able to follow me. Unless you can take up the cross and abandon your possessions, you are not able to follow me." The crowds that were following Jesus were likely filled with curious onlookers who had heard of his healings and wise teachings. Jesus is perhaps trying to shock them out of any naïve notion that following him is going to be all miracles and mysticism. It certainly sounds shocking. Hate your family? Earlier Jesus was teaching love your enemies. Love your enemies and hate your family. Shocking. What Jesus is saying, I think, is that the price of discipleship is sacrifice. Be able to sacrifice the hatred you have for your enemies. Be able to give up the love you have for your family. Be able to sacrifice your possessions, the things you own. Sacrifice is the price. Sacrifice shows devotion. But a willingness to sacrifice also makes us more able to follow into the difficult places where Jesus leads. Jesus tells two little parables about planning ahead. You would not start a building project without at least calculating whether you can pay for it. You would not go to war without at least sitting down to consider whether you could win. Likewise, you do not start down the road of following Jesus, the road of discipleship, without first thinking about sacrifice and whether you can handle it. Jesus is not trying to be shocking. He is just being practical.

Practical or not, we are still shocked. We thought following Jesus meant loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves. That sounded tough enough. Now we are supposed to sacrifice our family relationships, our possessions, our very lives? We love Jesus and we want to take up a cross and follow him, but why can't it be a small cross? Maybe Jesus was exaggerating. He did not mean literally sacrifice everything, did he? Surely there is a middle way, a less extreme, less expensive alternative. We cannot all be Mother Theresa or St. Francis or Martin Luther King, Jr. We cannot all give up everything. Who would pay the power bill for the church? There must be a path of discipleship that allows us to live somewhat comfortable lives while still making small sacrifices for God and the church and each other.

We may want a middle way, but unfortunately, Jesus does not offer a cheaper alternative. Perhaps it is because an economy-brand of discipleship may not stand up under tough conditions. Eventually, we will be tried and tested. We will be led into difficult territory. Maybe we get sick. Or maybe we are called to care for the thousands of children who are sick every day with malaria and hepatitis and HIV. Maybe the stock market crashes and we lose everything. Or maybe we are called to live more simply so that the millions who live in extreme poverty can simply live. Maybe we, ourselves, come face to face with

death. Or maybe we are called to risk death for someone else's sake. In those situations, a casual discipleship might give us the strength we need, but it also might prove lacking. A less intense version of following Jesus might give us the freedom to love in the midst of hardship. Or it might leave us unable to see beyond our own suffering. Now take it to another level. What if we had to go to prison for our faith? What if being Christian made us the target of violence? Would a somewhat comfortable brand of Christianity give us the stamina to turn the other cheek? Would it give us the vision to see the face of God in the faces of our enemies? The reality is that cheap discipleship is not a good deal. It is more comfortable, but it might only work as long as life is comfortable. When life gets uncomfortable, we will rely on God's grace to get us through. But if we try to walk the path of discipleship that is easy, we may find it hard to perceive God's grace at work.

Jesus wants us to know God's grace. The costly kind of discipleship sets us free to accept God's grace. Jesus wants us to be free and he wants us to set each other free, and the expensive path is the way to get out of bondage. Miracles and mystical teaching can only go so far. Jesus tells the crowds in today's reading to be willing to hate their families and their very lives. If we are going to be free, we have to see that love of family can sometimes turn into a fear of upsetting the status quo. Love of life can sometimes turn into a fear of death. Jesus does not want us to hate our families. He wants us to hate the fear that families can sometimes create. Fear keeps us in bondage. Freedom means we are unencumbered by fear and can choose the grace-filled path. We can choose to take up a cross. We can choose to shoulder a burden for others, we can choose to make a sacrifice. Fear means that we try to avoid suffering. Freedom means we can accept the suffering that comes with loving unconditionally. Jesus makes sacrifice the price of discipleship because it is in sacrifice that we find our freedom. When we sacrifice something for God's sake, especially something valuable to us, then we are free to accept the infinitely valuable grace of God. Jesus makes discipleship expensive, but the price is right, because a sacrifice for God is righteous. Our sacrifices put us in right relationship with God by opening us up to receive God's love and power and mercy.

Are you sold yet? Even though we may see that what Jesus is offering is wonderful, we may not be ready to buy. We may look to the saints who followed faithfully in the way of the cross the same way we look at an expensive car or a fancy phone. Looks really great, but it is too much to spend. The good news is that unlike a nice car or fancy phone, Christian discipleship is within everyone's budget. We all have just enough to pay, because it costs everything we have. No wonder it is hard for us who have a lot, because it costs us more. We may have more to lose, but we have everything to gain. Even so, we may still insist on a cheaper deal, a less extreme version of discipleship. We may not be ready to give it all up just yet. Fortunately, God is patient. God still loves us, and God will accept our small sacrifices, but God will not be satisfied with them. God will not be satisfied until we are free, free to love, free to follow Jesus, free to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, free to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, free to beat swords into plowshares, free to create a world where God's justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. Free at last. But freedom does not come cheap, because cheap freedom is just another form of slavery. Discipleship, the road to everlasting freedom, is expensive, but the price is right, the price is righteous. The price is sacrifice. Give thanks that Christ made his sacrifice for us that we might receive grace to follow him and offer everything to God.