

Counting the Cost

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on Sept. 4, 2022
based on Luke 14:25-33*

On my travels during a summer sabbatical I took a couple of years ago I passed a rural highway billboard in which a smiling preacher, clutching a large Bible, says, “The Bible is the answer to every one of your problems.”

Makes me wonder if that pastor has ever actually read the Bible.

I mean, okay, I’ve found the Bible to contain a fair amount of wisdom, but it never occurred to me that it’s a self-help book. I mean, frankly, I don’t believe that Jesus is here to meet my every need. Sadly, he is often sold every day, like soap flakes, with that in mind.

It was Carl Jung who said, so wisely, “Our serious problems cannot be solved. They can only be outgrown.” Think about that for a moment.

I mean, look, if you come to Jesus with your questions he is apt to leave you with more questions than answers. Come to Jesus with your problems, and he may diminish your anxiety with his well-articulated promise of peace, but he may also give you *new* problems you would never have had before you met him.

My justification for talking like this comes, of course, from the way Jesus talks in this morning’s Gospel. Jesus is becoming popular. His numbers look positive, and he’s testing well in focus groups.

Luke says there’s a “great crowd” clustering around him. You might think Jesus would be pleased by the size of the crowd; take the crowd’s magnitude as confirmation of the validity of his message. But no, what he says to the great crowd is sure to reduce the size of it considerably ...

Whoever comes to me and doesn’t hate father and mother, spouse and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even one’s own life—cannot be my disciple. Whoever doesn’t carry their own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. (14:26-27)

Not the most inviting lead-in with which to begin a sermon.

Far from trying to make it easier for people to follow him, he points out how hard it is. Jesus is talking to a company of people that has begun following him from town to town. They are not people he has called, though. They have simply shown up, full of enthusiasm, but Jesus is something less than welcoming. He tells them not to get their hopes up; that more than likely they can't afford what they think they want.

He suggests that they go home and do some sober feasibility studies before deciding to burn any bridges to follow him. You can be sure some of these people are puzzled.

Because, look, they adore him. They are like what we called *Dead Heads* in the 1970s, 80s & 90s. They have chosen to live on the road. They can't wait for the next show in the next town even if it sounds a lot like the last one. There's something about the energy he exudes that they have to be close to, no matter what they are missing back home.

This is the ancient world where people seldom traveled more than a dozen miles from their birth-place in a lifetime. They sense he will be opening up a brand new world any day now and think they are willing to pay any price to be there when it happens.

But Jesus has qualms about possibly misleading them. It's like they are 14 years old and they think they are running off with the circus when instead, he knows they are headed into a kind of battle, unarmed and untrained.

At the tail end of the sabbatical I mentioned earlier I spent ten days in England. I was staying with a dear friend in a sleepy little town in the Cotswolds where nothing ever happens. It's the kind of place Jane Marple calls home, if you like to read Agatha Christie who-dunnits. Breakfast is followed by morning tea and then, boom, it's lunch and then it's afternoon tea. Get the picture? But while I was there the circus was in town.

I was having breakfast on the main street one of those mornings in a little restaurant called simply, *The Kitchen*, and I found myself sitting next to a principal member of the circus – a young man of about 28. I couldn't help myself, so I asked if he had, you know, "run away and joined the circus." Without missing a beat, he gave me a joyful kind of "Yes," and added, "One morning my wife left me and by mid-afternoon I had joined the circus."

Note to self ... how to deal with a catastrophe – join the circus.

So, okay then, back to the text here --- why does Jesus say all these disturbing things about hating your mother? One Biblical interpreter, Barbara Brown Taylor, suggests that maybe he is using a figure of speech unfamiliar to us today. Barbara put it this way – she said that in Jesus day, the way you stated a preference was to pair two things and say you hate the one and love the other.

It didn't have anything to do with real emotions. It was a matter of priorities. So if I said, "I love the mountains and hate the beach" it would not actually mean that I felt hostile toward the waves and Haystack Rock; it would mean that the Mount Hood country was my first choice when it came to a beautiful view, or a day in nature.

I don't know that this helps a lot, but it does seem to me that priorities are clearly what is on Jesus's mind in this passage.

He is on his way to Jerusalem and he knows what a hard road he has ahead of him. Add to that the fact that followers of Jesus were already being persecuted for aligning themselves with him.

Yes, and to have one rowdy Christian in your family meant that everyone in your family was liable to arrest, so, it was true then that a turn toward Jesus was, by definition, a turn away from your family, whether you wanted that or not.

Once a person made it their priority to follow Jesus, everything else fell away, not because God had anything to do with it, but because that was just the way the world worked. As long as the world opposes those who set out to transform it, the transformers will pay a high price.

Consider Nelson Mandela, or Liz Cheney, or any number of world changers.

I think that is what Jesus wants us to know. He is not threatening us. He is not trying to bedevil us with impossible demands. Out of sheer love, he is refusing to make following him seem any easier than it really is. Why?

Because he doesn't want anyone to get halfway through building a tower and have to abandon it, or go charging into any battle without the troops needed to prevail.

If this all sounds overly dramatic then maybe it's a sign we've lost track of what following him is all about.

Is following Jesus about being a good stable citizen who is family oriented, or is there something about changing the world that might involve personal risk? Because, look, the kingdom of God he talks about in the Sermon on the Mount sure doesn't look much like the world we are living in here in 2022, does it?

Blessed are the *peacemakers*? Do good to those who persecute you?

Is following Jesus about being part of some air-tight, hermetically sealed environment where nothing that upsets us ever knocks on our door? Or might following Jesus get us in trouble with someone in authority once in a while? Because that's what he is asking.

One of my favorite preachers of yester-year, Ernie Campbell, once said, "If I'm following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk?"

Good question. A young man who grew up in a church I served in the year 2000 now lives in Klamath Falls. He's only about 34 but he's already retired from his first career. He was a *Top 40* Bull Rider. That's a very lucrative business when you get to that level but you have to face the world's meanest bulls. He retired after breaking his neck and arm and back more than once.

When he was in the thick of it, I asked his mother how she could afford insurance for him. She said no broker ever asked any questions. "But," she said, "if he'd been an underwater welder I couldn't have afforded it."

I wonder if Jesus thought following him was like being an underwater welder where the average life expectancy is 35.

"Whoever comes to me and does not hate mother, father, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Discipleship can cost all we have, all that we love, all that we are.

That is less God's doing than our own. If the world were kinder to its reformers, following Jesus's ethic might be a piece of angel food cake, but it is not and Jesus doesn't want anyone to be fooled.

Let's not forget that he went out of this world on an instrument of torture. A Roman cross.

In my last church two mornings a month I'd sit on some steps below the pulpit with about 70 children at a time from our church's Preschool. We'd look into a Bible story together for a few minutes. Once while waiting for all the classes to gather, one by one, I was visiting with one of the four-year-olds. He was asking about our many stained glass windows and we looked together at the one close-by of Jesus on the cross. He shook his little head and said, (and I quote), "Jesus is *a/ways* dying."

It was one of those times, you know, when you realize it takes a child to sum something up for you. I don't know where he might have gone to church on a Sunday or what books he'd been looking at but he knew the odd and awful fact that when you see Jesus he's most often hanging on a cross and it's sure not ... pretty.

Jesus IS always dying ... and it sure better mean something. Right? I mean, he's always offering to share it with us, too; asking us to get underneath it with him – help him carry it in some way. And NOT, I think, because he wants us to suffer or lighten his load in any way.

No, and listen to this: maybe it's because he wants us to know how alive you can feel underneath something that heavy. How it can take your breath away to embrace what Jesus says is our top priority – a Christian's one true necessity, defending things like truth and justice and something as fragile as democracy, and doing it with your whole self.

Remember the protests that went on a couple of years ago in Hong Kong? Remember the young people who crowded the streets to say they didn't want to live in a totalitarian state? I will never forget what one of the young protestors said: "We're all going to die anyway. Why not for this?" Wow.

They were part of something that they hoped would change the world and they had never felt so alive in their lives.

Jesus, too, knew this in his bones.

I remember participating myself in a demonstration five years ago in front of the Federal Building in downtown Salt Lake City. President Trump was in town and there were just three dozen of us making our disdain for his policy about separating children from their parents and locking them in cages. We hung out there in the middle of a downtown intersection for a good long time; long enough for the President to be tipped off that we were there.

He was shocked that even in a deep red state like Utah he would find pushback. It made him angry, so, under pressure from the governor, the Salt Lake Police sent out a fully-outfitted SWAT team just as we were about to wind things up and go home. I didn't even know Salt Lake had a SWAT team.

But, I'll tell you, it was something, watching all those tall policemen get out of their bus with their batons and shields and flint-black uniforms.

They formed a line and this adrenaline went through me in a way I can't remember, except maybe once or twice when I was working for the fire department when I was 20. It's an amazing thing.

The police, I need to say, were wonderful. They didn't want to be out there – they were just doing their job that day and they smiled at us as wide as possible through their visors to let us know that.

After a few minutes of letting them know why we were there (at the tops of our lungs) we all went home. But I won't ever forget the feeling. It gets your blood up like nothing else except, I imagine, being in a war.

Honestly, I don't know what I would do if I *really* thought my life was in danger. I don't know what I would do if push *really* came to shove. Perhaps the answer would have to do with what was I felt was at stake; what we might be liable to lose if some of us didn't stand up. I don't know.

Fifteen years ago the church I was pastoring hosted the parents of Rachel Corrie. Remember that name?.

Rachel Corrie was the supremely idealistic young woman who at age 25 was single-handedly trying to save a Palestinian family's house from being bulldozed by the Israeli military in Gaza. Wearing a florescent orange jacket, she was killed on the spot by the tractor doing the demolition.

Now, I happen to be the father of a very spirited and principled daughter, so it was sobering and scary for me to hear Rachel's parents honor their daughter's courage there at our church.

The thing that hit me the hardest was when her mother told us that when she was raising her three tiny daughters she had wanted to keep a diary so she could write down some of the amazing things they said every day. But here's the rub. She didn't have the energy to do that.

She said that parenting was so exhausting she often fell asleep before they did. That's just the way it is for moms and dads sometimes.

Anyway, one morning Rachel, aged two, said something her mother just had to write down – she said. “Momma, is “brave” part of growing up?”

It's all there in the child when she's born, you know. The spirit is fully formed.

But here's the deal. I think that what Jesus is saying in this text today is that putting your life on the line is NOT for everyone. That's why he offers it as an invitation.

There are **not** a lot of people who, like Rachel Corrie, have what it takes to shoulder the cross when it really counts. But I do **not** think that the rest of us more timid ones are lost because that scares us. Not for a minute.

I think Jesus just wants us **not** to take it for granted, not take for granted the sacrifice he made and thousands of others have made since he left this earth, in his name.

I think he just wants us to not forget what it costs.

Amen