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The Cost of Discipleship

Megan Robinson¹

Luke 14: 25-33

For many of us, September is a time when our lives start to get busy again. There seems to be a slower pace in the summer; the sun is up longer and the weather is warm, there are fewer commitments, the days can sometimes seem endless and full of possibilities. The summer tends to provide time for reflection and opportunities to restore our reserve of resources.

Then comes autumn, whether we are retired, working, or in school, we are about to re-engage in a life overfilled with commitments and demands. Right here in our own church building, after a summer break, we will once again have bible studies and committee meetings, luncheons, choir practices, and more. As church members we will ask for what little time you have to be invested in not only church activities but also community projects like knitting blankets and hats, helping to fill the local food banks, and of course we will ask for some of your money to help heat the building and pay for the sidewalk to be cleared come winter.

Parents will give what little disposable income they have to back-to-school supplies, school pizza lunches, and maybe some swimming or music lessons. Students will give-up their sleep and self-care to read, and write, and attend classes.

In the face of these demands some of us, including me, will look for a way to do as much as we can with as little effort and resources as possible. This is not because we are lazy or unmotivated. It is a response to the world that we live in; the demands of life that many of us face means that sometimes good enough IS good enough. The cost of life in our society is high, it seems to require more and more of our finances, our time, our energy, our love, and our engagement.

In order to be kind to myself and encourage those around me to be kind to themselves, I may fall on mantras such as: 'it is the thought that counts,' or 'something is better than nothing', or 'at least I tried'.

What we heard from this morning's Gospel reading is that this attitude is not good enough for Christ. In this passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is asking those around him to be fully in or fully out. To be a disciple, there is no place for any type of "when I can" or "most of the time" type of commitment.

And Christ's words are harsh in this passage. He states: If you do not hate your family and even life itself, you cannot be his disciple; and if you do not carry the cross and follow him you cannot be his disciple; and if you do not give up all your possessions, you cannot be his disciple. Christ says "If you do not hate, if you do not suffer my burden, if you do not live without, you cannot live with me for God."

Upon my first reading of this passage, in preparation for today, my first thought was: I must be reading this wrong. So I read it slowly and out loud to myself; not once, not twice,

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but three times. Yes, Jesus said those following him need to hate their family as a requirement. Then my second thought was: I am in trouble. The cost of admission is too steep; I cannot afford this. I cannot hate my family, I have many burdens I carry, just not my own, and although me and my children do not have many possessions, what we do have we like and I have worked hard for these possessions. My third thought was: I cannot be a disciple of Christ. So I sat and I thought, and I prayed, and I reached out to others to help me understand what Christ is asking in Luke's account.

As it turns out, some things are lost in translation; so that from Jesus' spoken Aramaic, to written Greek, and eventually the English translations that we read from today, it is most likely that Christ is asking the disciples to love him more than their families, not hate them. (Phew!) So, I rethink what Christ is asking of for discipleship.

To love God more than my family. Although sometimes I struggle with that notion as well, I understand it, as God's love is omnipresent and unconditional. To carry the burden of the cross means that the life of discipleship requires humbleness and humility; think of the vulnerable experience of carrying a crucifix; the ego has no place here. And lastly, not to be a slave to possessions. Again, I think of the lovely summer weather. How many people have experienced time in the sun, by one of the breathtaking water sources here in Canada and felt connected to God and at peace? There is no possession needed for this. I live close to the Grand River and, through the Grace of the Haudenosaunee peoples whose land I stand upon, I can observe the beauty and the wonder of nature and feel the presence of God. Discipleship requires us to give of ourselves, and yes, at a cost, but the reward is great.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer is well known for his work about discipleship. He says that the call to discipleship is a difficult call to answer because it must be made alone. We must fully buy-in with all that we have in the moment: no line of credit, no lay-a-way, and no thirty day money back guarantee. This is the price of admission and you and me, we must decide on our own, are we committed? When confronted with what appears to be a costly decision, Bonhoeffer says suddenly we take note of all of our responsibilities and cling to them, as excuses, so that we can alleviate the weight of a decision made.

At the time Jesus made this declaration in the 1st Century, Luke states that there was a crowd. This crowd would have had disciples in it, yes, but also people who were curious, and probably even those challenging and mocking Christ. There was no building for Christ's followers to call their own. There were few places of refuge and even fewer people to share the life of discipleship with. Being a disciple was costly, it was risky, it meant threats of being ostracized and even threats of violence. It wasn't just the cost of time, and money, and energy; it was a cost of everything they knew. The disciples traded a life they knew for a better life they could not have comprehended. The caveat of this high cost commitment is the buy-in to a better life, both now and forever. It is leaving the world as they knew it, as we know it, behind to enter into a new community of faith and fellowship and communion.

There is no bargain basement deal or time limited offer on the engagement of a Christian life. There is a cost. We are required to love Christ, and thereby God, first, letting go of the notion that we always know what is best for us, because we don't. We are required to bear witness to the oppression of others and speak-up for social injustice and systemic oppression. This might get us in trouble as we push back against the status quo. We are required to remove the possessions and ego-driven desires for money, power, and self-indulgence from our lives in order to make room for Christ. Discipleship is costly, because it

requires a commitment that opens us up to discomfort. But like the disciples, we have Christ to follow, God's love to support us, and a community with whom we can share the cost.

The cost of living is expensive, not only do I feel financially in debt, I am also broke on time, energy, and I even run short on kindness, hope, and charity at times. What I recognize is that I do not have to suffer these debts alone. I have a community right here, with all of you. Together, as we enter September with renewed commitments, we can commit to each other and commit to Christ that we will help each other cover the cost of membership so that we are all able to afford a committed discipleship.

Thanks be to God, Amen.