

The Thorns in Following Jesus
Luke 9:57-62; 14:25-35
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Churches sometimes go to great lengths to get people to come to their church. Not long ago a church called the Positive Impact Christian Church offered a door prize of \$1,000. All the local newspapers reported this incentive-based approach to evangelism.

However, the preacher was deeply disappointed when only thirty people showed up when he was anticipating hundreds. *After all, he thought, who could resist the appeal of a \$1,000 door prize for a lucky worshiper?*

Contrast that experience with a newspaper ad that appeared in London in the 1800s which said, *Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success.*

Thousands of men lined up to volunteer in response to this ad signed by Sir Ernest Shackleton preparing for his sea voyage seeking the Northwest Passage.
[thanks to Mickey Anders, Pikeville Christian Church, Pikeville, Kentucky]

Which approach are we going to take? Do we make following Jesus out to be easy or challenging? Do we appeal to self-interest only, or do we appeal to the opportunity to give yourself to something greater than yourself?

Our text today leaves no doubt about the method Jesus took. Instead of giving something away, he demanded that his followers give everything up.

For everything there is a cost. Any parent will tell you that one of the toughest tasks of a parent is to teach your children the value of things. Parents try to teach their children that, for everything we desire in life, there is a cost.

Now, in today's scripture, we are told by Luke that great crowds are following Jesus. Multitudes. Jesus is a success. And who can argue with the numbers? But what does Jesus say to those crowds? He tells them to count the cost of following him.

No king would go to war without first sitting down and contemplating if he has enough weaponry to win the war. Otherwise, he would be advised to go and ask his opponent for terms of peace.

Likewise, a contractor would look like a fool to begin a building project without first contemplating how many bricks he needs to finish the project. Otherwise, he will get half way through, run out of brick, and look ridiculous in front of his neighbors. Count the cost. It makes a lot of sense. And yet, this may be a particularly difficult word for us in the church to hear. We want to make things easy and attractive for people. We want people to want to come to church, and we want to make it easy for them.

People who are interested in helping churches to grow, sometimes talk about "user friendly churches" and "seeker sensitive" churches. I think what this means is churches where

any person can walk in off the street and immediately feel comfortable, and understand exactly what's going on.

Everything should be easy and simple and appealing and just what I'm used to and just the way I like it and I shouldn't have to learn anything new. Everything without cost. It's one way to draw a crowd.

But in our gospel here, Luke 14, these great crowds seemed to Jesus to be, not a sign of success, but a problem which needs to be addressed. Luke says, *Large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them....*

What Jesus turns and says to the crowds that day—his sermon— sounds like an assault, a means to ensure that the crowd will be a great deal smaller at next Sunday's service!

To these great crowds, Jesus tells them that there is a cost to following him and he urges them to count the cost. It sounds like he's trying to weed out the crowds, to prune the crowds, not grow the crowds. Jesus sounds decidedly "seeker insensitive."

Follow me, Jesus says. I don't even have a place to call my own. But follow me anyway. Don't take time to say goodbye. Don't look back. Follow me.

Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.

Jesus ends his speech with a tough one: *None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*

I think if we have adequately understood the real meaning of the cross in our lives, this possessions requirement is not so hard to understand. When a person effectively dies for Christ, possessions don't have much meaning.

A great example of this can be found in this morning's *Commercial Appeal* in Wendi Thomas's column about the family who made a decision to move into the Binghampton neighborhood.

[http://www.commercialappeal.com/mca/local_columnists/article/0,2845,MCA_25341_5376808,00.html]

It's like the story Jesus told in Luke that we looked at in our Ash Wednesday service where God says to the man who was storing up a lot of stuff, *Don't you know you're going to die? Then what?*

We often get into discussions about stewardship that lead to legalistic teachings about giving 10%. But stewardship is not a legalism matter; it's a Lordship matter. It's a "following Jesus" matter. When Jesus is Lord, he owns all that we have and all that we are. If you want to be a follower of Jesus, you better count the cost.

Imagine the conversation with Jesus going something like this: Jesus offers us happiness, joy, peace, healing, security, eternity. We marvel at such a valuable thing, and we say, *I want this thing of such value. How much does it cost?* He replies, *It's too precious, too costly. But how much? Well, it's very expensive. Do you think I could buy it? Oh, of course. Anybody can. But you say it's too expensive. How much is it? It costs everything you have -- no more, no less -- so anybody can buy it. I'll buy it.*

*What do you have? Let's write it down.
I have \$10,000 in the bank.
Good, \$10,000. What else?
I have nothing more. That's all I have.
Have you nothing more?
Well, I have some dollars here in my pocket.
How many?
I'll see: 30, 40, 50, 80, 100, 120 -- 120 dollars.
That's fine. What else do you have?
I have nothing else. That's all.
Where do you live?
I live in my house.
The house too.
Then you mean I must live in the garage?
Have you a garage, too? That too. What else?
Do you mean that I must live in my car, then?
Have you a car?
I have two.
Both become mine. Both cars. What else?
I have nothing else.
Are you alone in the world?
No, I have a spouse, two children....
Your spouse and your children too. What else?
I have nothing else, I am left alone now.
Oh, you too. Everything. Everything becomes mine: spouse,
children, house, garage, cars, money, clothing, everything.
And you too. Now you can use all those things here but don't
forget they are mine, as you are.
[Adapted from an illustration found in *The Call To
Discipleship*, by Juan Carlos Ortiz]*

This passage of scripture today gives us hard words from Jesus, words with which we are all uncomfortable. One thing is sure

Jesus demands a costly discipleship. When we truly make Jesus Lord, we give him all that we have, all that we are, all our relationships, and even our own lives.

One of my best friends, Kyle Reese, is Pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida. They are had an Ash Wednesday service like we did. They do actually impose the ashes on the people's foreheads in their service, though.

I said at our service Wednesday night that Kyle has only been there a few months, so he hadn't done an Ash Wednesday service there yet. He called me the other day to ask me if I knew what you are supposed to say when you put the ashes on the people's heads.

I didn't know what you're supposed to say. But I have on my desk the Book of Common Prayer, which is the Episcopal worship book. I looked up Ash Wednesday there, and it gives this instruction. It says:

The ashes are imposed with the following words:

Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.

That's not a very uplifting message, is it? *Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.* But for centuries Christians have been saying those words on this day—going back to just a couple of hundred years after Jesus' death.

Remember. That's the key word for in the season of Lent, I think. Remember.

As I said Wednesday night, it sounds kind of strange, telling us to think about our death. When everything in the world around us talks only about youth and life and living to the fullest and staying healthy and staying alive and staying young. Ministers, even, talk about the “power of positive thinking” and getting “your best life now!”

Nevertheless, the word for this time is remember. *Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.*

And in Jesus’ parable from Luke that I mentioned earlier, God reminds this man to think about his death. *Fool*, God calls the man who has forgotten that one day he shall die (and then what will become of all his stuff?).

Tony Campolo is a well known writer and speaker. He’s a sociologist at Eastern College. He’s also Associate Pastor of a predominately African-American church in Philadelphia. He says they have a student recognition day once a year, and all the kids come in who are going to off to college. Black teenagers, bright kids. And the old folks in the church love to hear them as they say,
I’m studying Literature at Yale.
I’m studying Music at Julliard.
I’m studying Science at Harvard.

And they love to hear these kids, and they just—at this church they’re very responsive—they go, *Thank you Jesus. Mmmm-mmmm. Beautiful, thank you Lord.* It’s a really nice service, everybody has such a good feeling.

And when they were all finished and sitting down, bright-eyed and happy, the pastor of the church got up and he said,

CHILDREN!, he said, *YOU’RE GONNA DIE! YOU’RE GONNA DIE!* Interesting thing to tell kids on student recognition day.

He said, *You don't think you're going to die, But you're going to die. They're going to drop you in a hole. They're going to throw dirt in your face and they're going to go back to the church and eat potato salad!*

He said, *When you were born, you were the only one that was crying - everybody else was happy. More important is this. When you die, will YOU be the only one that's happy? And everybody else will cry?*

It depends, he said, *It depends on what you live for. Do you live for titles? Or do you live for TESTIMONIES!*

Oh that’s good. Titles or testimonies. Then he did what only some preachers can do, he swept through the entire Bible in five minutes.

He started in Genesis and swept through Revelation in five minutes. He said, *There was Moses, and there was Pharoah. Pharoah had the title. Ruler of Egypt. That's a good title. Good title - Ruler of Egypt. Moses, on the other hand, was the low life, who had no power, but when it was over Pharoah may have had the title, he had the title, but Moses had TESTIMONIES.*

He said, *There was Daniel and there was Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was King of Babylon. Good title - King. King Nebuchadnezzar. But when it was over, that's all he had. He had the title, he had the title, but Daniel had the testimonies.*

He said, *There was Jezebel, the queen. Good title - Queen. Every woman would love to be Queen Jezebel. And there was Elisha. Elisha the prophet of God. She was going to kill him, but when it was over, that's all Jezebel had, was a title. She had the title, but Elisha had the testimonies.*

Here on the first Sunday of Lent, a time we set aside to examine ourselves and our lives, I'm telling you the truth, one of these days you are going to die, and they're going to drop you in a hole, and they're going to throw dirt in your face, and they're going to go back to your house and eat potato salad.

But the only question is, What do you leave behind? Are you going to leave behind a title—President of this, Vice-president of that? Dr.? Are you going to have an obituary with a list of titles? Or are there going to be people standing around your grave or your living room giving testimonies, testimonies, testimonies?

Jesus says, *If you think you want to follow me, you better count the cost. It's hard. It involves a cross. It involves letting go of everything, I mean everything.* Are you sure you want to follow Jesus?

But one day you will die, and you'll have to give up everything then, anyway.

And when you die, what will it all mean?

What do you want to have done with your life?

What do you want your life to have counted for?

Will you get a prize for dying with the most money or the most stuff or the most titles?

When you die—and remember, you are from dust, and to dust you shall return—when you die, do you want a list of possessions, a list of titles?

Or do you want testimonies—testimonies of the remarkable life of someone who counted the cost and followed Jesus anyway?