

Counting the Cost

As I was saying on August 7...

No, don't worry if you can't remember what I was saying the last time I was in the pulpit. Heck, I can barely remember and I wrote it, read it over to myself several times, and then delivered it to you. But a month ago, the focus of my sermon was on planning for the future. I was thinking then about the strategic planning process we'll begin on September 18 and I'm now thinking about it even more. So I thought it was pretty cool of God to have arranged my first week back in the pulpit after vacation to coincide with this Gospel passage in the Revised Common Lectionary for the day and Jesus' words to his disciples about planning. My sermon last month focused on the promise I see in the future for Good Shepherd Baptist Church and for Lynnwood but today, I feel the need to consider the cost of walking on the Jesus Way. Among the many things I've learned and taught about strategic planning in my career is the absolute necessity of carefully assessing the cost of any plans before they are put into action. As usual, Jesus was way ahead of the wisdom of the world when he advised his disciples of the same thing.

To begin with, I want to start by examining the Scripture passage for this morning in its context and attempting to clear up any misconceptions or vagueness brought on by the distance of nearly two thousand years and more than three times that many miles. The opening of the story, which may seem like a throwaway bit of trivia, actually tells us something important – “Now large crowds were traveling with him...” In all four gospels, the writers record that Jesus was uncomfortable with the adulation of crowds. Often, it seems, he seeks to dissuade them from following him with what he considers to be false expectations or for the wrong reasons. His remarks to them in this passage remind me of his off-putting words to the crowd in chapter six of John's Gospel. After what seemed to them to be a bizarre teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, many of those following him said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” ...Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” Jesus is separating, it seems, those who are serious about his message from the mere curiosity-seekers. Earlier in that chapter, he upbraids those who come looking for him after the feeding of the five thousand: “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.”

None of this is very surprising. I'm currently reading a book by the Baptist New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson entitled Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity. Johnson's thesis is that the “pagan” religions of the nations of the Mediterranean and Near East world actually influenced and had more in common with Diaspora Judaism and early Christianity than is generally credited. He carefully shows how those pagan religions and philosophies show four overarching ways of how people thought about religion in the world of the Caesars and how two of those ways were especially widespread. Most people, Johnson says, thought of their religious activities either as a way to share in the benefits of divine power or as a way to work towards their own moral transformation. I think if we were to ask Professor Johnson about our passage this morning, he would say that Jesus is calling out that first type of religious understanding in his followers – they are hoping to share in the benefits of the power that he clearly demonstrates – because he really wants them to focus on the second type of religious understanding – that they engage with him in seeking their own moral transformation.

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This interaction should sound familiar to us because it is repeated again and again in our Scriptures. The Children of Israel moan about the lack of food on their journey, then about the monotony of the food provided by God, then take advantage of Moses' absence to throw an orgy, complete with a golden idol. Moses tries to get them to learn the new Law. The Israelites, once settled in Canaan, adopt the natives' fertility gods and want a king. Samuel and a long string of prophets try to dissuade them and get them to think about their fidelity to God and their treatment of the poor. Paul fusses at the early churches to get their houses in order. John the Revelator warns the church in Laodicea that God says, "because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth." The approach to religion as a way to get God to do what we want God to do rather than as a way to learn what God wants us to do is an age-old problem and still just as much among us today.

So, what is it that Jesus is saying to the crowd to startle them into self-awareness? How is he describing an approach to religion and to life that is really consonant with the teaching he has brought them? I ask those questions so that we can hear more easily the meaning behind the words recorded. "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." We must remember, first of all, that Jesus is a highly effective teacher using a highly effective pedagogical trick: overstate your premise so that it is easily remembered. This particular bit of wordplay, using words for love and hatred, is well-attested in the Scriptures not to express ultimate love and hate but rather degrees of preference. Our Loving Creator did not hate the older son of Isaac despite the rhetoric used by the prophet Malachi and quoted by Paul: "Jacob have I loved but Esau have I hated." Nor did that same Jacob despise his first wife, Leah, despite his preference for his second, Rachel, even though Genesis tells us that "God saw that Leah was hated." We are not to hate our relatives, our spouses, or ourselves. But Jesus says we must put all these things after our allegiance to God.

One of the great New Testament scholars of the last century, F.F. Bruce, addresses this passage in his well-known book, The Hard Sayings of Jesus. He writes, "We know that in biblical idiom to hate can mean to love less... That hating in this saying of Jesus means loving less is shown in the parallel saying in Matthew 10:37: 'He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.' In Matthew's Gospel these words are followed by the saying about taking up the cross and following Jesus: the implication of this sequence is that giving one's family second place to the kingdom of God is one way of taking up the cross."

It can be hard for us to think of putting our families second to anything but it was even more so in the world of the first century. Allegiance to family was the core of life. Even today, in many parts of the world, children grow up expecting to marry whom their parents tell them to marry, to live in close proximity to their parents all their lives, to continue the family business be it farming, shopkeeping, or carpentry. This was the system of life and this, not the loving relationship between relatives or spouses, is what Jesus was telling his would-be disciples that they would have to be ready to abandon. Just as God called Abraham to abandon his home and go to Canaan, Jesus is calling his disciples to abandon the system in which they've grown up for a way of life that is different and better, a way of life in which the calling of God on their hearts is more important than family expectations or, to skip to the end of the passage, the possessions

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they've managed to acquire. Decisions about the future are to be made not with primary reference to the normal things that the world expects but to the will of God.

We must understand, however, that Jesus is not advocating some airy-fairy, "waiting on the Spirit," "I'll stick my finger in a random spot in the Bible and it'll tell me what to do" approach to life. Jesus expects his disciples, then and now, to do the hard work of figuring out how to lead a life pleasing to God. Just like the hopeful homebuilder, just like the anxious and besieged king, we must sit down and count the cost of our plans. The message here is not to not make plans but rather to make plans that adhere to our understanding of God's call on us ahead of all other calls. I'm happy to say that I don't think this sort of planning should be difficult for this congregation. You've done it before, back in 2002 and 2003, before you called me here. The decision to give away half the church's property cannot have been an easy one. In fact, there were still one or two people grumbling about it when I got here. But you made that decision anyway because you felt it was the best way to pursue the vision you believed you had from God. You knew the cost – had it been sold rather than donated, 2.2 acres could have yielded nearly two million dollars and served as the basis for a healthy endowment or as an immediate financial shot in the arm – but you made the decision based on "the God thing." And that has worked out just fine.

I don't know what decisions we are going to have to make in our upcoming strategic planning process. Will we have more choices to make that fly in the face of what the dominant culture expects of us, of what my British friends call, "quite the done thing?" If we do, I am confident that this congregation can make the choice to follow our best understanding of God rather than what might seem like the easy choice. If following Jesus as a model seems too lofty, let me suggest that we turn our eyes to a man who has represented Seattle's bitterest rivals. Like most Seattlites, I've been no fan of the 49ers' brash quarterback, Colin Kaepernick. But I've revised my opinion of him in the last week or so. His decision to sit one week and kneel another during the playing of the National Anthem might not be a choice that I'd make, but I understand his reasons for doing so and I applaud his sense of conviction that his use of the stage he has been given as an athlete to call attention to a national problem is far more important than his popularity and perhaps even his ability to hold that celebrity status. I think you all know of my commitment to the Black Lives Matter movement as well as my efforts to bring local police officers and people of color together for the safety of both groups, so I will not preach on that now. But if a San Francisco 49er can show the way to lift conviction above convenience how can we not do just as well?

As I do most weeks, I spent some time on Wednesday morning discussing this passage with my lectionary study group. My friend, Fr. John Foreman, like me a second-career pastor with years of experience in non-profit management and consulting, including strategic planning, reminded me of something important. Ultimately, it is not the plan we devise that will be important but that we sharpen our minds and soften our hearts in the process, that we remember what it is to think strategically about manifesting the will of God in our lives together. We will be engaged in holding firmly to the core of our vision, that which God has planted in us, while being willing to change the details of our plan as it evolves. We will need to count the cost while being ready to give all in following Christ, taking up the cross, as Jesus said.

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We are rarely called to give everything in our walk in the Jesus Way. I don't think that Jesus envisioned physical torture and death for all of his disciples, even then. But we should remember that Jesus does call us to radical obedience. Scott Hoezee writes in his web commentary on this passage: "In Jesus' day, to be under the sign of the cross was to be under the sign of death. It was to live in such a way as to make clear that you have put to death the things of this world—its addiction to power, its adoration of only the beautiful and successful, its cut-throat ways of climbing to the top of any and every heap, its love of violence and intimidation and war. To live under a cross-bar was to engage in a form of living death, of sacrificial living for the sake of others and of the kingdom of God." As we remember the sacrifice of Jesus, let us prepare ourselves to make our plans without reference to those ways of this world. In God, through Christ, we will find the power to do so. Thanks be to God.