

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, JUNE 27, 2010
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Scriptures: Psalm 77; 2 Kings 2:1-14; Luke 9:51-62

THE COST OF FOLLOWING JESUS

We know from being in church week after week and from reading our Bibles what Jesus is like. We know that Jesus fed the hungry, healed the sick, raised the dead, and most importantly saved souls. We know that if we follow Jesus that we will be part of that great program. But we soon find out that if we truly follow Jesus we also experience hard work, fear, stress, and the difficulty of obeying the commands of Christ. The disciples in our story today from the gospel of Luke got a first-hand lesson in what Jesus expected from those who follow him.

If there is anything Jesus wanted his followers to know it is that being a Christian is not just something you add to your life to make it more interesting. It's not like adding cream to your coffee or salt to your meat. Being a Christian is your life, it is not the cream or the salt– it is the coffee and meat . Following Jesus is not something you do in your spare time or as a hobby. Following Jesus is what you do as you live your life. Martin Luther said, “ Religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”

Following Jesus is not easy because it does have a cost. The passage today comes right after the passage where the disciples are questioning Jesus as to which one of them will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Which one will sit on the right hand of Jesus? Silly question to be asked by those who could not even stay awake in the Garden of Gethsemane the night their Lord would be taken away to the cross. Yet, Jesus knew their hearts and loved them. That is why when they asked him the question about the unbelieving Samaritans he didn't send them away in disgust. He told them they were wrong to ask that fire come down on those who did

not believe the good news. It was no longer the time of Elijah. It was a new day, and Jesus came with a message of love which he would carry no matter what others said or did, he would carry it all the way to Calvary. The disciples, bless their hearts, were ready for revolution. They would have liked to see God rain down fire and destroy those who opposed Jesus no matter where no matter who. They wanted to see injustice corrected, and those in high places brought down. They wanted everything to be made right, which meant the way they thought it should be, and they wanted it to happen immediately. But Jesus had a different agenda, didn't he? We know that because we are viewing the story now as history. Jesus did not come to shake up some small corner of the world. He came to save all people in every time and place, and to do that he had to keep his face turned to Jerusalem and the cross. The disciples would learn what it meant to be true followers of his. Many of them would suffer and die for the gospel of Jesus Christ, and new disciples would take their place. The good news would be proclaimed again and again.

Composer Giacomo Puccini wrote a number of famous operas. In 1922 he was suddenly stricken by cancer while working on his last opera, "Turandot," which many now consider his best. Puccini said to his students, "If I don't finish 'Turandot,' I want you to finish it for me." Shortly afterwards he died. Puccini's students studied the opera carefully and soon completed it. In 1926 the world premiere of "Turandot" was performed in Milan with Puccini's favorite student, Arturo Toscanini, directing. Everything went beautifully until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to put down his pen. Tears ran down Toscanini's face. He stopped the music, put down his baton, turned to the audience and cried out, "Thus far the Master wrote, but he died." A vast silence filled the opera house. Toscanini picked up the baton again, smiled through his tears and exclaimed, "But his **disciples** finished his work." When "Turandot" ended, the audience broke into thunderous applause. No one at the premiere performance ever forgot that moment."

Just before Jesus ascended back into heaven after the resurrection he said these very important words which have been called "The Great Commission:"
"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Those words of instruction from Jesus tell us something important– the work did not end with him. In order for the world to know about what Jesus had done, the disciples had to go forth and tell the good news. After they died, new disciples must take their place, and after those new disciples died still others would take their place. The work had to be carried on, and the followers of Jesus Christ must continue to preach and teach the word until the Lord comes again. Just as the great opera Turandot had to be completed by the disciples of Puccini, so we the disciples of Jesus Christ must work to complete carrying the message of Christ to others until He comes again.

The work of God comes with a cost, as I have already said. Elijah the great Old Testament prophet worked so hard that he was both emotionally and physically exhausted, and our compassionate God knew that. So, the mantle of Elijah was passed to another prophet– the prophet Elisha. Elisha would carry on where Elijah left off, and he would have what he needed for the job ahead. He was given a double portion of Elijah's spirit so that he would be strengthened to do what must be done, because God's work could never stop. It is such a beautiful story of God's provision for those who carry the good news. The journey may be long and hard, but God will provide what is needed.

However, there are some important rules. Jesus spoke about them to his disciples that day outside of Samaria. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." And, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet again, "No one who

puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

It seems so harsh doesn't it? A man tells Jesus that he will follow him anywhere, but Jesus cautions that he better be careful what he says, there will be no lodging at the Holiday Inn or even the Motel 6 for his followers. Does Jesus perhaps know that the man is one who likes his creature comforts? Harv and Kay were telling me this week about packing their motor home to go on a trip to the Pacific northwest, and how many things they had to take with them. I understand their dilemma, for I am one of those who does not pack lightly. I like my creature comforts. How about you? Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

Jesus invited another man to follow him, and the man seemed want to do that, but he said that first he would have to bury his father. Probably, the man's father had not yet died, maybe he was old or ill, we do not know. We do know that for Jews of that day the obligation to take care of the burial of their fathers was a sacred duty, their most holy duty perhaps. Yet, Jesus seems to be saying that even that comes second to following him and proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God. How many tasks, duties, commitments do we let stand in the way of doing what God calls us to do for him? Another man called by Jesus to follow him had these very poignant words, "Let me first go say goodbye to my family." Man, does that one hit me right in the heart! "Please, Lord," I hear myself saying, "let me go say goodbye to my loved ones." How hard it is to not have the opportunity to say goodbye. We hear of people who were not able to get to the bedside of a dying loved one in time to say "I love you, goodbye." It is so hard for them not to have that last moment together. The man in the story who wanted to say goodbye was probably thinking that he might not see his family again if he took off following this man called Jesus. And that was the situation faced by many who have gone out to serve the Risen Christ over the centuries.

What did Jesus say in regard to the heartrending plea of the man to say goodbye to his family? He said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." Woooooo! That sounds pretty heavy, what does it mean? If you have ever ploughed a field with a hand tiller like in Bible times, or even a modern rotor tiller, and you want to make a straight furrow in which to plant your seed, you know better than to look backwards. As soon as you look over your shoulder to see where you've been, while you are still going forward, you run the risk of making the next part of your furrow crooked. It's like driving a car and looking into the rear view mirror too long at something that you passed on the road. While you are looking in the mirror, your car is moving forward and swerves into another car or goes into the ditch at the side of the road. Looking back takes you away from the business at hand, and Jesus knew that. It was his way of saying be sure you know what you are getting yourself into.

"Years ago Dean Kelly wrote one of the first books that studied and diagnosed mainline Protestant church decline in North America, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion with a New Preface*. One of Kelly's most controversial conclusions was that churches that demand more of their members grow and churches that demand less decline."¹ I believe that might be true. Look around and see for yourself. Look at the churches that demand that its members be in worship services each week or even more than once a week. Look at those which demand that their members attend Sunday School or Bible Study classes and serve in the church in some way. Look at the churches that tell their congregations what they must believe. Very often these are the churches which we see that have big congregations. They demand a lot from their people and the people seem happy to respond.

William Willamon wrote this: "I know a young man who joined the Marines. He

¹*Pulpit Resource*, by William Willamon, for June 27, 2010.

left the family farm and, during what ought to be the very best, fun years of his life, enlisted in the Marines. Why did he do it? What attracted him to the rigors of basic training and boot camp? Was it his sense of patriotism? His desire to give back something to the land that had given so much to him?

No, he said that none of those factors motivated him. What propelled him toward the Marines was, 'I wanted to be tested. All my life I've gotten by easy. Nobody ever demanded much of me at home or in school. I think that maybe my parents and teachers didn't think I had much ability or talent. I wanted to be somewhere that people believed in me enough to demand big things out of me. I wanted to show what I was made of. That's why I joined the Marines.'"

Willamon asks a good question. "Is there a lesson here to be learned by the church?" If we earnestly consider the scriptures for today, we cannot escape the fact that Jesus was like the Marines— he demands big things of us individually, and of the church as a whole. You are not here to play act or dabble in Christianity as if you were learning to paint pictures or swing a golf club. Christianity is not a hobby or a past-time. You have joined up, entered the ranks, made the commitment, signed on the dotted line. You need be who you say you are in private. You need to fulfill your vows, pay your dues. Am I being harsh? Let me read something to you.

Do you promise, by the grace of God, to be Christ's disciple, to follow in the way of the Savior, to resist oppression and evil, to show love and justice, and to witness to the work and word of Jesus Christ as best you are able?

Do you promise, according to the grace given you, to grow in the Christian faith and to be a faithful member of the church of Jesus Christ, celebrating Christ's presence and furthering Christ's mission in all the world?

Do you promise to participate in the life and the mission of this family of God's people, as you are able and as God gives you strength, sharing regularly in the worship of God and enlisting in the

work of our church as it serves this community and the world?

All who are recorded members of the church have given the answer “I do” to all these questions before God and the whole congregation. Even if you are not a recorded member of the church, but are member of this worshiping congregation, you have at one time or another stood up and said these words during a Sunday morning service when members have been received: **“We promise you our friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue to grow together in God’s knowledge and love and be witnesses of our risen Savior.**

Over and over again in this church, I have seen the response to the call of Jesus to “Follow me.” I have seen it in the response to the Food Drive, to Vacation Bible School, to mission offerings, to physical work around the church, and just this week to a new ministry of women for women. I have seen the sacrifice and the desire to serve. But the time to carry on and answer the call of the Great Commission is always now, it is never later. Our business is to keep on proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. To do that it is necessary to grow in knowledge of the word of God and to renew a commitment to prayer and worship. Don’t look back. Maybe in the past you haven’t been the best example, haven’t carried your share of the load, haven’t given of yourself or your talents. Jesus said to look forward not back. The road lies ahead. Say yes to him, place your faith surely and firmly in him, and follow him.

Let us pray: “Holy God, help us in our desire to follow Jesus with our whole selves, and help us to love you with our bodies, our minds, our hearts and our gifts. Amen.

