

The message given by Rev. Dr. Tom Zoelzer on July 18, 2010 based Luke 14:25-33.

Counting Costs

“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Luke 14:33)

Wow – can I pick a passage for the annual meeting Sunday or what?! Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem heading toward that week we call Holy Week when he confronted the religious and political authorities about the reality of God as he understood it. He was on a mission, but as you heard, large crowds were now traveling with him. He seemed to be concerned about the “parade” atmosphere that had developed.

So he turned around and gave them a reality check – *“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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*

I think it’s the word “hate” that gets our attention in this passage along with the possessions part. “Hate” is not a word we hear Jesus use very often and seems contradictory of other things he taught. “Hate” seems to be the correct translation of the Greek here, but it seems to be based on a Semitic slang expression that people in Jesus’ day understood. This Semitic expression means to “turn away from” or “to detach oneself from.” Jesus seems to be saying “Whoever comes to me and cannot turn away from father and mother, cannot detach oneself from wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes even detach oneself from life itself, cannot be my disciple.” And then he goes on to tell two parables about counting costs to follow him including giving up worldly things.

Do you know what this passage reminds me of? If you have been through High School or college, you recall that you would have four or five academic classes as part of your schedule. But every semester, I would always have one class where the instructor acknowledged that, yes, students had other courses, but theirs was the most important and therefore deserved top priority for attention and effort. Jesus is calling for top priority in our connection to life.

In Jesus' time, family was everything. Family was a person's identity, their economic livelihood, and their connection to society. People were known by who their father was and what their family did.

In this reality, Jesus was calling for a commitment higher than family, higher than possessions, and higher than life itself. Jesus was asking for a serious commitment to be one of his followers. Jesus was asking for top priority over everything.

Well, does Jesus deserve top priority? The New Testament seems to think that the answer is "yes!" Jesus is the one who comes from God. Jesus leads to the path of eternal life. Jesus has a discipline and a way for us that blesses us and keeps us in right relationship with God and each other. Jesus is the source, the light, the way, the path. Jesus is the one! He is the one we are to follow!

The New Testament declares that there is much benefit for following Jesus and being his disciple, but there is also a cost, and so we are asked to count the costs before following. But does anyone really know the costs before they do something?

People often are asked to count the cost before getting married or having children. But do people really understand the time, the financial, and the emotional commitment that is involved until they are married or have a child? I think not. Yet we learn by doing and experiencing and usually are enriched because of the commitment. Many are glad that they made the commitment to marry or have children.

Now I need to say that many have also had heartache in marriage or with children or not being able to have children. When it comes to marriage, interests change or the dynamics of the relationship fall apart and the relationship comes to an end - heartache. Children are a joy but also a gamble. We never know for sure what will happen. Yet, I can only speak for myself to say I am glad I made the commitment to marry and to have children. There have been more costs than I anticipated but more joyful as well. Counting cost needs to allow for unexpected joy.

I would like to propose today that there is joy in following Jesus which needs to be included when counting the costs. We know that there are costs when it comes to being a Christian - Especially this time of the year when it's pledge time, we know that there is a financial component that goes with discipleship. We are invited to be percentage givers and share meaningfully as a way to further the ways of Jesus and engage in the discipline of sharing.

On Sundays, we are expected to get up and give God the glory on the Lord's Day. We do this while others sleep or go to the beach. At FCC, we are expected to not only worship but grow in our faith by doing worship +2 by engaging in an

educational experience and a service component. This all takes time as well as our treasure. So there is a cost.

But there is also a benefit. There is something about sitting in this room on Sunday mornings that charges our spiritual batteries and gives our insights about how to live and what is important. We become a better person because we grow in our faith through education. We have new insights through service that enrich us and give us a sense of accomplishment and worth.

I have often wondered what my life would have been like if I had never been to church or part of a faith experience. I think my life is richer and deeper because I have decided to follow Jesus.

Some years ago when I was the pastor at a congregation in Mokena, I made the commitment to have two “covenant players” assist with worship one Sunday. Covenant players are people who because of their love of Christ and their love for drama, leave family and friends and travel around the country performing in churches. Covenant Players practice Jesus’ principle of taking hardly anything with them on their journey. They are dependent on the hospitality of their hosts. So not only is a small fee paid to the Covenant Player Association for the talent of the presenters, but the host church is to house the players and feed them.

That particular year I had arrange hosts for our covenant players but they arrived early and the hosts were not home. I called my wife about bringing the players over for a while. My wife loves having people over, but she had just finished preparing some food for her church and the house was a mess.

She was a little embarrassed and unsettled when the two guests arrived and then were left in our home while I went to go get a cake I needed for my congregation. Yet, one of the Covenant Players, after visiting for a few minutes, saw a piano in our home and asked if she could play it. She commenced to sit down and for 15 minutes playing one song after another that lifted my wife's heart. The Covenant Player had the gift to bring joy through the gift of music. Nancy said she realized how wonderful it was to make the effort to have someone come into our home and bring their gifts that provided an opportunity for connection and experience. Commitment often brings joy.

Being a Christian is not always an easy thing. It takes time, it takes energy, and it takes commitment. Yet most of the time it brings lessons and experiences that enhance the quality of our life and makes our life blessed. Being a Christian is about giving of our time, talent, and energy, but the cost brings reward and joy.

Over a year ago now I told the interim search committee one of my favorite stories. It is an anonymous story that goes like this: At first I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of the things I did wrong, so as to know whether I merited heaven or hell when I die. God was out there sort of like the President. I recognized God's picture when I saw it, but I didn't really know God.

But later on when I recognized the power of God in my life, it seemed as though life was rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike and I noticed that God was in the back... helping me pedal.

I don't know just when it was that God suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. God makes life exciting! When I had control, I knew

the way. It was rather boring but predictable. It was the shortest distance between two points. But when God took the lead, God knew delightful long cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places and at breakneck speeds; it was all I could do to hang on! Even though it looked like madness, God said, "pedal."

I was worried and asked, "Where are you taking me?" God laughed and didn't answer, and I started to trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure. And when I'd say "I'm scared," He'd lean back and touch my hand.

He took me to people with gifts that I needed, gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me their gifts to take on my journey, our journey, God's and mine. And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away; they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met, and I found that... in giving I received, and still our burden was light.

I did not trust God at first, in control of my life. I thought God would wreck it, but God knows bike secrets, knows how to make it bend to take sharp corners, jump to clear high rocks, and fly to shorten scary passages. And I'm learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion... my God.

And when I'm sure I just can't do anymore, God smiles and just says, "pedal."

I have decided that my least favorite part of being a Transitional Minister is the phase we are in right now. Transitional ministry can really be divided into 4 phases of unequal length, and we are currently in the 3rd phase.

Phase one began when I arrived, and all the congregations I have served have been anxious and unsettled when I arrived. A senior pastor has left and people are unsure why things have come to that point and unsettled about what is going to happen next. The congregation sees the Transitional pastors as necessary realities and are willing to go along with things like cottage meetings and discernment moments to move the process along for a new pastor.

Phase two begins when the search committee is formed and it becomes an important time to put all that information and hopes into a church profile to find a new pastor. The Transitional pastors play an important part in advising and directing.

Phase four begins the day the Search Committee comes to the Governing Board and says “we have a candidate to recommend.” That begins the time of announcing who is being called, setting a congregational meeting, having a special weekend and worship service with the candidate and their family if there is one, and a vote by the congregation. Once called most candidates have to go home and resign at their current ministry and give notice which is often at least 60 days. Those days are filled with the question, “I wonder what the new minister will want to do when any decision needs to be made.

Phase three is the phase between the completion of a church profile and the announcement of a candidate to the congregation. For the search committee it is discovering that there is a bigger time commitment than they thought when they said yes. For the congregation, it is the time of wondering if it is worth the cost to spend so much time in transition and waiting. For the transitional

ministers it is about seeing so many things we could be doing and starting but knowing it is not our place to do that unless there is congregational energy to do so.

It is a time to realize that we are on a bike ride with God and Jesus Christ and allow our mission statement and core values move us into a new day of following Jesus. We have some pedaling to do here at Flossmoor Community Church. We don't know where the journey is taking us, but we are on the road with Jesus trusting that the Spirit is guiding us to wonderful place. The journey may seem costly but what joy and satisfaction we discover along the way when we live our faith where Christ is Central and Diversity is Cherished! Amen.