

PENTECOST 13 Luke14:25-33

A very wealthy man lost his wife when their only child was still very young. So the man hired a housekeeper to take care of the house and to care for the young boy. The boy and the housekeeper became very close. The housekeeper looked upon this child as her very own, and the boy regarded the housekeeper as the mother he never had. But then, strangely, one day, the boy also died before he reached manhood. The housekeeper stayed on caring for the wealthy man who now was in such an emotional state having lost his wife and now his son, that he soon died of a broken heart.

When the man died, his lawyer and his business partners began searching for the will which they were certain he had made out years before, although no one had actually seen it. They looked everywhere, but no will was found. The estate was eventually taken over by the state and an auction was held to dispose of the man's personal property and his mansion.

The housekeeper went to the sale, not because she had any money to spend, but because there was one particular item she hoped she could get. There was a picture of the little boy that hung on the wall over the fireplace in the mansion. She desperately wanted that picture. She loved that boy and still carried fond memories of the times she had spent with him. When the picture finally came to the auction block, nobody wanted it, so she bought it for a relatively small amount, but an amount which represented most of what she had.

She brought it home and since no one had cared for the house for quite a long time, the picture had become very dirty. She decided to take it apart, clean the frame and glass and put in a new backing before finding a place to hang it so that she might have the memories of those wonderful years. As she was taking the picture apart, some very important looking papers fell out of the back of the picture. At first she didn't know what to make of them, so she brought them to the rich man's family lawyer.

As the lawyer read the papers, he discovered that this was the long lost will which everyone had searched for. There was a note with the will which read, "I leave all my wealth to the one who loved my son enough to buy his picture."

This woman, this housekeeper, had a love that carried her over the rough times, that carried her over the sad moments, a love for the boy that continued right through every moment that she lived. It was a love that moved her to attend the auction, to give up her meagre resources, which meant more to her than the thousands others were willing to spend. But because of her love, her love turned into action, she was rewarded beyond her wildest dreams.

This story paints a picture of what Jesus is trying to say. He is explaining how we translate his love for us into our love for our neighbour. He is talking about the cost of discipleship. The woman counted the cost of her love for the boy and was willing to part with most of her resources to keep his memory alive.

Luke tells us that Jesus is trying to explain to the hordes of followers, the cost of discipleship.

He says, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life – he cannot be my disciple."

How do we explain such harsh words? Does Jesus really mean that we should hate our families and hate ourselves? Just what does Jesus mean? In the tradition of the church since the Reformation, the most important rule for understanding what the Bible says is that we compare Scripture with Scripture. When we find a hard-to-understand passage like this one, we look for other similar passages of Scripture that will help clarify the meaning for us.

What we discover in other passages, such as Matthew's Gospel using similar language, is that the Aramaic word for "hate" which Jesus uses here is a comparative verb. It actually means to, "love much less than." It is a word that tells us that the love we have for our closest family members, compared to the love Jesus demands from us, looks almost like hatred. In short, if God and Creation are given the proper all consuming love Christ expects, then the highest and best of all our other loves, even love for oneself, will seem to be in a far-distant second place. To follow Jesus, to be a disciple of his, one must put everything else in life in second place.

We need to put at arms length, to put in second place, everything in our lives except Christ. He comes first. He comes first before family, before our own lives. As we let the impact of that statement filter into our hearts, we see that Jesus is calling us to a radical sort of life, a life that sets those who believe in Him apart from the rest of society.

Jesus asks his followers, if they are willing to pay the price to follow him? "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." This must have taken away the breath of some of the those among that crowd. Most likely, some of them had witnessed the public shame and humiliation of a condemned criminal carrying his cross through the city streets to the place of execution, just as Jesus would eventually do. The people got this picture, and were shocked as they wondered why Jesus would make such an arduous demand of His disciples?

Many in that crowd who followed Jesus had been looking forward to the dawning of a new

day and now it looked as though it were here. As he began his earthly ministry, Jesus had said that the Kingdom of Heaven was at hand. Some wrongly assumed that he meant that an age of victory over Rome's occupying forces was just around the corner and that peace and prosperity would soon be theirs at no personal sacrifice.

But Jesus is saying, "If you are looking for a cheap ticket to glory, you are not going to find it with me. The life of my disciple is a life of suffering and difficulty. If you come expecting a free trip along easy street, you will go away disappointed."

Thomas à Kempis, in his "Imitation of Christ" writes that "Many come following Jesus who love his heavenly kingdom but few come looking forward to suffering. Many admire His miracles but few follow Him in humiliation to the cross."

That is the truth Jesus wanted to convey to his followers then just as he does today. Discipleship is a demanding thing. Look before you leap. You had better count the cost, see if you are willing to make such a sacrifice for me; see if you are really willing to pay that kind of price.

And then Jesus continues with, "Any of you who does not give up everything he has, cannot be my disciple." Another difficult demand! There are those Christians who have actually experienced it, lived it, and gave their lives.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran confessing church pastor and a leader in the resistance movement against the Third Reich, wrote from a Nazi prison just before he went to the gallows for following Jesus, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him, 'Come and die!' The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

The history of the Christian church runs red with the blood of those disciples who sacrificed their all for their commitment to Jesus. There are no discount days in discipleship. Every single day is demanding. Bonhoeffer knew that.

As did Jim Elliot, a young missionary who wrote in his journal just a few years before he was murdered by a group of Ecuador's Huaorani Indigenous people he had set out to help and evangelize in 1956. He wrote, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." When word of the sacrificial deaths of Jim Elliot and his missionary partners arrived, it sparked an interest in Christian missions across the church. Many missionaries serving today were inspired by the sacrifice made by Jim Elliot and his friends.

That list of martyred and persecuted Christians continues to this day. In Eastern Europe, many pastors were imprisoned and beaten under Communism. Catholic priests and Lutheran pastors continue to risk and even give their lives in South America as they

lovingly work for justice, giving all they have, even their lives for God's suffering people.

When Jesus said we should be prepared to give up our possessions, he was calling his disciples to recognize that discipleship is never a cheap thing. He proved it by going to the cross in our place. He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Following Jesus is never easy, but his word is still the best news this world has ever heard for bad times or good, and that is what we are called to remember. Discipleship is a demanding thing. Discipleship is a delightful thing, and discipleship is a determined thing. If we want to follow him, we need to come with all that we are and with all that we have.

As Bonhoeffer says in his book, *Cost of Discipleship*, Cheap grace is the preaching for forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confessions, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a person must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it costs a person his life. It is grace because it gives a person the only true life. About Lutherans, he wrote: We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ.

Costly grace is the incarnation of God. Costly grace is the living word, the Word of God. Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. Grace is costly because it compels one to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

We have made the gift so cheap, we have watered it down so much, that it has lost its meaning and its greatness for many people. We have made discipleship so cheap that for some people belief in Jesus becomes like the line in our church constitution. “*If I give my penny to the church and commune once a year, that is all there is to it.*”

Some feel that they don't need to be associated with the worshipping community. “I don't need to change my lifestyle. I can cheat my neighbour, I can gossip, I can hold grudges, I can be greedy and not share my wealth with God. I can be disrespectful, I can abuse my body, because God's grace is cheap, freely given.”

Cheap grace does more harm than good. Sure, we can say look at all the people who are on our church rolls, but when it comes right down to it, if a church gets half of its members to worship the God they believe in, they feel really good. Maybe even 30% is great! But Jesus isn't asking for half or 30%. He wants His grace to motivate our lives all the time,

every day, 24 hours a day, each day that we live on this earth. Jesus wants us to remember the cost he paid for our lives, so that we don't cheapen this grace, but value it to the highest degree. What does it take to follow Jesus?

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He made a good decision. He decided to build them a church. No one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marvelled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included. It was a masterpiece.

But then, someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets in the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship.

"Each time you are here," the noblemen said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark. This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark."

Are we willing to live by costly grace, the grace that was paid for by the love of Christ and which asks us to pay the same price by surrendering all to Him? Jesus knows firsthand what it is to sacrifice, for he gave himself up for us. The question is, what can we give in exchange for so great a love as His. What will we give?

Two thousand years or so after he lived on earth, there is still something exciting and magnetic about this Jesus of Nazareth that draws people to him. It must be the power of God behind his word, and the authority with which he calls us to serve him even now.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR THE WORLD - SEPTEMBER 4, 2022

(*God we pray Help us*)

Loving God, even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she places her young near your altar. You are attentive to all you have in all you have made. God who listens to every living thing, help us listen as you do.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, help us to provide refuge and care to every animal and nurture every living plant that is part of your world. Help us be attentive to all you have made. God, in whom all creation thrives, Help us listen as you do.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, when Jesus cried out and gave up his Spirit, the earth shook and the rocks split. You are known by the whole of creation that listens to you. God, to whom all creation responds help us also to respond to your call.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, help us hear and long to know you just as the earth and rocks do. Help us to learn from the ways in which we experience creation to recognise you in the diverse and glorious beauty we discover. God, to whom all creation responds. Help us respond to you.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, you are present in your creation and seek to heal her wounds. You can be found walking in the garden. Open our eyes to see you, the gardener. God, who is ever present with your whole creation help us to be attentive to your presence with every breath we take.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, we often abandon your creation and cause it harm. Help us to follow in your footsteps and learn to walk mindfully and reverently in the garden like you. God, whose presence is evident everywhere in your creation help us cherish being in your presence too.
God we pray **Help us.**

Loving God, who bears every voice, knows each cry of injustice, and is attentive to the suffering of the earth: teach us to listen. Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world and not overconsume or do harm to it, that we may listen and respect this wonderful world you have created and not close ourselves off from its life-nourishing energy. Help us to recognize and appreciate how reliant we are on your creation to support all living beings. Reveal to us the ways in which we need to learn to be good stewards of all which we have been blessed. Forgive us where we have failed to hear your voice in how we treat the earth.

God who listens to every living thing. Help us listen as you do.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer (Adapted from the New Zealand Book of Prayer)

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echoes through the universe! The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and testing, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.

Amen