

Sunday September 8th, 2019
13th after Pentecost

PRAYER: O God, our Rock and Redeemer, you are the stronghold and the refuge of faith, the foundation of hope and the safeguard for all who praise your name. With you we can walk and not stumble, run and not fall, and lie down in safety. We shall fill our days with visions of your lofty splendor, and consider each moment as sacred because of your grace.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God in Christ, who endured the cross in your own flesh for our sakes, hear us as we confess our sin. We would be your bold disciples, but we fear suffering. We would carry our cross, but it weighs too much. We count the cost of following you-as long as there are benefits; but to renounce all we have is a devastating prospect. Forgive the conditions we make when we try to obey, and free us by your grace to forsake all and follow you. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: God is just and takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Through Christ there is hope of eternal forgiveness. Turn back from your past and embrace God's promised assurance: In Christ there is redemption and release from all sin.

STEWARDSHIP: We come as free agents of Christ's reconciling love to offer our lives as a thank offering for the bountiful mercies God bestows on us. We offer our tithes and offerings, as a demonstration of our desire, to see hearts refreshed by the grace of Christ, and hope restored by his deliverance. May God grant us the privilege to be used as his stewards to dispense his love and grace. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Gracious and loving God, Lord of all creation, in your wisdom and grace you have made us dependent upon you and upon one another. You have made us in such a way that through our fellowship with other human beings, we discover our need for communion with you. We praise you, O God, for esteeming us so highly, endowing us so richly and trusting us so fully. We are humbled by your willingness to take such risks for our growth into mature human beings. We bless you for having seen in us more than we see in ourselves and for having done better by us than we do for ourselves.

You have called us to be your witnesses. All too often, we have failed your summons. Occasionally we have hated evil, held fast to the good, and been affectionately devoted to one another. Yet we have seldom been zealous in showing honour, patient in enduring tribulation, or generous in responding to our brothers and sisters. If we have denounced the flagrant abuses of those in power over us, we have winked at the vices of those who live around us.

For all these transgressions, whether by omission or commission, we ask your forgiveness, O God. But remind us again of the high cost of your forgiveness, lest we forget the magnitude of the task to which you have called us. You have called us to preach the good news to the poor. Yet the world swarms with the poor who have never heard the good news. You have called us to liberate the oppressed. Yet half the world's people have never known life without oppression. You have called us to set the prisoners free. Yet we continue policies that condemn persons to a life of bondage. Renew within us, dear Lord, our commitment to the victims of the world's injustice.

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Today is a special day in the life of your church; not only here at First Baptist but all over the world. Today is the day you have called us all to return from our summer adventures to renew our service and our fellowship with one another. As the programs and activities of this fellowship restart and renew in the next few weeks we pray your blessing upon all who give of their time and their hearts to serve you. As we seek your guidance on a number of issues and a number of possible ministries, we pray your delicate hand will steer us in the way we should go. Protect, guide and lead our staff and volunteers as we seek to witness to our community of the wonderful love of Jesus. Let our deeds and our hearts honour you this day, O God, and honour you as we go forward into this very exciting adventure you have prepared for us.

BENEDICTION: May the God of grace create in you that which is pleasing in the Lord's sight; and may the God of peace equip you with every good to do the Lord's will. Amen.

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Luke 14:25-33

“Counting the Cost.”

One thing I have begun to understand, about many famous and infamous leaders in history, is that they almost always believed they knew what was best. Even if their tactics were unjust, or even down right evil, they believed they were the one person best equipped to make that decision. Sometimes that belief got very twisted, as we have seen particularly in the twentieth century with the likes of: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, Idi Amin, etc. It has always seemed to be this way. Even the likes of Alexander the Great, held ideas that they thought gave them license to do whatever they pleased.

Alexander, for example, believed that the Greek gods gave him the right to expend his soldiers anyway he seemed fit. The men under his command were simply tools to his conquest and his personal glory. It is with this in mind that I share with you a story from the later conquests of Alexander, that reveal his convictions about his men, and how far some of his men were willing to go in their obedience to him.

Alexander was a clever strategist, and he possessed great negotiating skills, but one day he and his army encountered what could only be referred to as an insurmountable obstacle. Alexander had divided his army to accomplish two different military goals, and the group that he personally commanded, came across a city that was heavily fortified, and defended by seemingly overwhelming forces.

“Surrender to me immediately,” commanded Alexander. The king of the city laughed. “Why should I surrender to you?” he called down from the high wall of the city. “We have you far outnumbered. You are no threat to us!” Alexander was ready to answer that challenge. “Allow me to demonstrate why you should surrender,” he replied. Alexander ordered his men to line up single file and start marching.

He marched them straight toward a sheer cliff that dropped hundreds of feet to rocks below. The king and his soldiers on the wall watched in shocked disbelief as, one by one, Alexander’s soldiers marched without hesitation right off the cliff to their deaths. After ten soldiers had died, Alexander ordered the rest of his men to stop and to return to their formation. The result of this little demonstration? The king and his soldiers surrendered on the spot to Alexander the Great.

The king and his soldiers realized they could never defeat someone whose men were so utterly devoted to him; devoted so deeply that they would willingly walk off a cliff to their deaths. I am sure that the question has crossed your mind after this little story; why did the men just march over the edge without a protest? I also wonder how the eleventh man in line felt as the march was halted just as he got to the edge.

Now how do you feel when I tell you that Jesus is calling you to just such a level of devotion to him? He calls us to “pick up our cross and follow him”. Remember that the cross is an instrument of death. Jesus is calling us to die with him, and for him. Jesus therefore commands us to count the cost of being his disciple, to being his followers.

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And that cost, in a nutshell, is everything you have and are. That being said, one of the things that should be on our minds, whenever we study the bible, is that each writer liked to stress certain things more than others. For the gospel writer Luke, one of the most important themes in his writing is discipleship. It is a prominent theme in the gospel of Luke, and in the book of Acts which he also wrote. It is clear from Luke's writing that the early church wrestled with what being a follower of Jesus actually meant, and how much such discipleship would cost each person.

In Luke chapter 14, Luke does something very interesting, and also very informative. Beginning in verse 15, he recalls the parable of Jesus about a man who holds a great feast and invites people to come. However, many of the people invited make up excuses why they cannot come. The host is angry, at the unwillingness of people, to set their busyness aside to come and celebrate with him, so he instructs his servants to go and invite anyone they see, on the street. Bring anyone, no matter their situation who is willing to come.

Jesus' point in this parable is that the invitation to be his disciple is open to everyone. All that is required is a willingness to follow. This sounds great. However, in verse 25 we read about the other shoe dropping. Yes, the invitation is open to everyone, but before you accept that invitation, and commit yourself to Jesus, you better understand fully all that it entails. Even the setting of this story is meant to make us see that there is significant difference between following Jesus and being his follower.

Luke begins in verse 25 by telling us that a great crowd was following Jesus, and suddenly he turns around and addresses them. Picture that for moment: Jesus just stops on his journey, which will ultimately end where; Jerusalem, of course. And he addresses the crowd. He is calling them to account. Why are you following me? What is your motivation for being on this journey with me?

Let us be honest here that the vast majority of people in that crowd, really had frivolous motives for following. We can speculate that they journeyed along in order to see more miracles, get some more miraculous loaves and fishes, and maybe hear some more wonderful stories and teaching. Some certainly misunderstood what Jesus was all about, and saw him as a political figure or military revolutionary, and wanted to see Rome brought to her knees.

It is clear from the gospels that Jesus could easily draw a crowd, but how many people of these multitudes were really disciples or true followers. This gospel story reminded me of the scene from Brazil a few summers back, of the Pope being present for World Youth day celebrations. I saw the pictures of the beach in Rio absolutely packed with millions of people there to see the Pope and celebrate Mass.

Looking at the picture I wondered; why are these people there? What did they hope to gain? Were they there to truly deepen their walk with God, or were they there because it was the current big thing happening at that moment? Were they following Jesus, or simply following the crowd? Jesus is very blunt in Luke 14. Being a true disciple means walking the "Way".

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It means walking where Jesus walks, and going to the same destination he is; Calvary. In the book of Acts, Luke even makes a point that the early church was referred to as “The Way”. Jesus isn’t looking for spectators; he is looking for participation. He is not looking for just a piece of us; he is looking for all of us. Furthermore, Jesus is up front and blunt, in telling the crowd the true cost of following him on the “Way”.

I may have shared this with you before, but one of the most difficult and unpleasant things I ever have to do is buy a car. Frankly, I really hate the process. Oh, I enjoy the vehicle, the test drive, and the thought of driving down the road in my new or slightly used vehicle. What I don’t like, is the point when the salesperson takes you to their little cubicle, and begins to haggle out a price for your car.

To be honest, I am convinced there is a great deal of sleight of hand with the figures in these negotiations. Finally, after seemingly hours of back and forth, the price of the vehicle is agreed on, and everyone seems happy. But it isn’t over is it? Next comes the taxes, well that is not the dealer’s fault; it is the cost of buying something. Then as you read the contract you discover: administration charges, plate transfer charges, fuel charges, prep charges, and suddenly your negotiated price evaporates.

I go home from these experiences feeling like I have been taken advantage of, and that is why I am a big fan of the new policy of “all in pricing”. Don’t muck around with me; just tell me how much it is. Well Jesus, in his call to discipleship, has an all-in pricing formula. He wants us to know up front what it is going to cost for us to follow him. And there is no way around telling you that the cost is very high.

There is no way to water this down, and Jesus won’t let us. In this passage, Jesus focuses on three aspects of the cost of following him. Let us remember, he is addressing the crowd that followed him. Remember he is standing on a road representing “The Way”. He is saying in part, “If you want to go where I am going, you better know what that entails.”

Yes, you all have received the invitation to follow, but are you prepared to count the cost. The first thing he tells the crowd is that following him means severing family ties. Jesus tells the crowd that love for him, loyalty for him, must take precedence over our families. More than that, we must love Jesus more than our own lives.

In a similar account of these words in Matthew, Jesus is recorded as putting it this way, “If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine...If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it.” (Matt. 10: 37, 39)

Jesus’ point is that family can interfere with our keeping to “The Way”. Our families may want us to go in other directions, pursue other paths. Families make claims on our time, talent and energy, which can keep us from our duties as disciples. This is the same point we encountered a few weeks ago in Luke 9.

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Jesus said to a man, “Come, be my disciple.” Luke reports that the man agreed, but he said, “Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.” Jesus replied, “Let those who are spiritually dead care for their own dead. Your duty is to go and preach the coming of the Kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59)

The second cost to truly following Jesus is that we must embrace radical self-denial. That is what it means to pick up our cross and follow Jesus. In following Jesus, our self-interests take a back seat. The mission and ministry that we are called to, is to be our top priority. One of the best ways of thinking about this point is to realize that a cross is not a place of comfort.

A cross is a place of pain, suffering, and self-sacrifice. Jesus’ point is that if we are not willing to suffer for the Kingdom, then we do not understand him or the nature of walking “The Way”. In the Kingdom of God there are no limits of any kind to what may be asked of us. The more we base our security on our own abilities, our own money, and our own sense of righteousness, the further we are from “The Way”.

Finally, we need to consider that walking with Jesus, means giving up our material possessions. Jesus says in verse 33 that, “No one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me.” This may be the one hardest for those of us in the affluent west to embrace. In our society, the accumulation of wealth has almost become a religion for many people. We are encouraged at every turn to make more money, invest our money, and reap the rewards of money.

Our society can easily be summarized by Kevin O’Leary of Dragon’s Den fame and the CBC show Lang and O’Leary report that used to be on. Every morning in Toronto on my way to the Donway church, O’Leary gave a little commentary on CFRB radio which was called “The Cold Hard Facts”. In every episode, and I mean every episode, he concludes his commentary by saying, “It’s about the money. It is always about the money.”

I don’t often agree with him, but he is right about one thing. In our society it is always about the money. Following Jesus means embracing the truth that it isn’t about the money, and it never was about the money. Salvation means, among many things, that we are called to a different path than the world.

The cost of following Jesus is very high. Are you willing to pay the price? I mean, you wouldn’t start building a building without first making sure you had enough money to complete it. If you ran out of money before you finished, people would laugh at you. You wouldn’t dream of going off to war without first making sure you had enough soldiers to win. If you didn’t, you would make peace instead of war.

Peter faced this decision in Luke 5. He was a fisherman. He loved his boat, his nets, his colleagues like James and John. Fishing was what he knew, and it helped support his family. After the miraculous net stretching haul of fish, with Jesus in the boat; we read that Peter, James and John simply left everything and followed Jesus. Catch that? They left everything, family, boats, nets, and income, everything to follow Jesus.

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Peter had no idea what was coming, but he trusted Jesus and he simply followed. I always wondered in thinking about Peter, how his family felt about him leaving his nets and them behind. “Are you crazy Peter?” his wife may have asked. “How am I going to feed the kids, while you go off with this man you just met?” But Peter still went following Jesus.

The way was rough, there were often no creature comforts to enjoy, and the whole incident of denial, trial of Jesus, and crucifixion: tested his commitment. I am sure there were many moments when he longed to be back at his nets. Actually, In John 21 after Jesus’ resurrection, Peter returns to his old ways of fishing, only to have Jesus call him again to a new purpose; “feeding his sheep”.

So, the question remains, are you just following Jesus, or are you a follower? Are you just doing Christian things, or are you really a person of Christ? Are you willing to pay the price to walk “The Way”?