

COUNTING THE COST

Luke 9:57-62, Luke 14:25-33

February 25th, 2007

When I was a teenager, I loved the scriptures where Jesus demanded all or nothing. “Come and follow me.” “Let the dead bury the dead.” “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.” “No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God.”

When I was a teenager, such demands were cause for both excitement and frustration. I was excited about the radical and complete commitment required by Jesus of his disciples. I wanted to be one of these spiritual marines. And I was dismayed by how many Christian adults seemed more like the Pharisees. They talked about giving your life to Jesus, but that meant going to an altar rather than selling everything and giving the money to the poor. They were farmers, school teachers, factory workers, and business people. Jesus said, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head.” How could these people leave church every Sunday night for soft, warm beds?

When I was a teenager, it all seemed so clear. If everyone would sell their homes and businesses, give the money to the poor, and head into the streets with the messages of Jesus, the world would be transformed. I couldn't understand how people who took the stories of Adam and Even and Noah and Ark literally could make Jesus' commands into metaphors. Of course, when I was teenager, I had nothing to lose by obeying Jesus' commands. His demands came with little cost.

The only demand that gave me pause was this odd requirement to hate your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters. Jesus said this was necessary to being his disciple. When I asked about this command, I was told we weren't to take these words literally. Jesus meant we should love him more than our families. I didn't ask why Jesus didn't just say that. Since I didn't want to pay that cost for following Jesus, I accepted this interpretation.

When I was a teenager, I thought discernment was easy. You simply did what Jesus demanded. Anything else was compromise.

One of the first pieces I ever wrote was a play called “No Compromise.” It was a dramatic adaptation of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Our college drama troupe performed that play a hundred times. In the play, scenes alternated between Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac and Jesus demanding complete surrender. In the middle of the play, there was a scene where Ananias and Sapphira are killed for giving only part of their offering to the church. We

usually took an offering to defray our expenses right after that scene. After the intermission, we continued this litany of guilt, shame and fear. The final line of the play had Abraham telling Isaac, "As long as you live you must remember this day and tell of it to your children so that they may pass it on to their children so that all our descendents may know this truth: Obey God and make no compromise." I can still remember saying those words and glaring at the audience.

I reread that play this week and cringed time and again. I thought about all of those farmers, school teachers, factory workers, and business people who were forced to listen to the ranting of a young man who didn't have a son, who didn't understand the cost, and who thought discernment was unnecessary. All you had to do was obey.

Rereading my writing, I was ashamed. I asked forgiveness for the damage I may have done. I was naïve. I hadn't faced enough touch decisions to understand how difficult it is to discern what is good, or how often we are forced to choose between treasured values.

Of course, my unquestioned acceptance of every command and story in the Bible began to crumble when my children were born. Suddenly, the uncompromising willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac was less impressive. He looked less like an example and more like a homicidal maniac. Once I had children of my own, I understood more fully the cost of discernment. My decisions impacted them as well. Once I had a home, I knew why people didn't sell everything and give the money to the poor. My decisions became complicated. Once I became a pastor, I discovered why we explain many of Jesus' demands as metaphors. If we took them literally, most of us wouldn't qualify as disciples.

When I was teenager, I thought I was a true disciple and most everyone else had compromised. Today, I realize how important it is to count the real costs in every decision. **Whether it is a command of the Bible, or a demand of Jesus, or a requirement of human law, or a request of the church, or the expectation of a friend, or the desire of a lover, if the cost is too high, we should disobey.** To pay that cost isn't compromise, it is insanity.

When I was child, I remember a missionary story from communist China. In the story, communist soldiers burst into a Christian church and announced that, unless the people spit on a picture of Jesus, they would be killed. Many agreed and were allowed to go. After they'd left, the soldiers announced that they too were Christians seeking to worship Jesus, but they didn't want anyone in the church who might be a spy.

At the time, I thought it was a great story. Our teachers asked what we would do if we were asked to spit on a picture of Jesus. We all dutifully proclaimed our unwillingness to betray Christ.

Today, I have completely different view. If soldiers surrounded our meetinghouse and announced we had to spit on a picture of Jesus or face death, I'd be the first in line. Think about it. Every picture of Jesus is simply an artist's recreation. None of them actually saw Jesus. Maybe it's a terrible picture. Maybe even Jesus would like to spit on it.

But, seriously, I cannot imagine Jesus would be pleased if every man, woman and child in this place were murdered in order to protect a picture. That is a cost I am not willing to pay. Maybe those Chinese people who spit on the picture weren't spies. Maybe they were wise. When they counted the cost, dying for that picture didn't add up.

Too often, I fear religion asks us to make false choices. Abraham was not the last parent to consider sacrificing his child to God. Indeed, many parents forget that God forbid Abraham from making such a sacrifice. I recently met a woman whose parents were missionaries. She spoke of their long absences, of being sent to boarding schools, and of feeling abandoned and neglected. She decided that, if religion required parents to choose between loving and nurturing their children and serving God, she didn't want anything to do with religion.

Phil told me this week of meeting a man with whom he attended high school. He remembered how close this man was to his brother. When Phil asked about his brother, the man said he hadn't spoken to him in five years, that his brother had made a lifestyle choice of which he couldn't approve. Phil guessed that his brother was gay and that this man had probably been told in church that he had to choose between his brother and God.

Let me repeat. Whether it is a command of the Bible, or a demand of Jesus, or a requirement of human law, or a request from the church, or the expectation of a friend, or the desire of a lover, if the cost is too high, we should disobey. Today, when I read the story of Abraham and Isaac, I wonder if the story is a warning rather than an example. I wonder if the lesson is that God doesn't ask us to obey in such a way that we do damage to ourselves or others. God kept Abraham from killing Isaac because that would have foolishness rather than faithfulness.

Discernment requires us to think carefully about what is vital and important to each of us. It requires us to weigh the merits of every command, even from Jesus, against what we sense to be good, gracious and wise. We are expected to count the costs before we respond. Jesus said, "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he, not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? For if he lays the foundation and is not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule him." Obedience without discernment is foolishness.

The reason most of us do not sell everything and give the money to the poor is because most of us have counted the cost and decided that decision would be worthless. It wouldn't solve the problems of the poor. It would create a whole series of problems for those who love us. When the cost is high, we must be especially careful not to do what simply transfers our costs to others.

This is not to say that there aren't decisions with terrible costs. There were Germans who refused to obey the Nazi laws requiring all Jews to be identified and arrested. Many of these people hid Jewish families. Some of them, when they were caught, were sent to the same concentration camps as those they had tried to save. I admire their decision. I want to believe I would do the same. But I don't know for certain. I've never had to weigh that cost.

If I had a family to protect or small children who might inadvertently reveal who I was hiding, I might have done nothing. I might have shared by disgust with Nazi policy with trusted friends, but failed to make my disagreement public. I might have decided the cost was too high. This does not make me evil. It makes me human.

There is a story from the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC that reminds me to be careful when judging others. A woman who survived the concentration camp tells of a German guard who would force her out of bed each morning, even tying her shoes, because she knew those who remained in bed were taken to the gas chambers.

It would be so easy to idolize those who resisted the Nazis and despise those who didn't, but the behavior of that guard reminds me that all of us do what we can do. Most of us make compromises.

Often pastors will come up to Phil and I after we speak on universalism and say, "I agree with your theology, but I'll never preach it or admit it to my congregation. I'd be fired." When I was a teenager, I would have thought them weak, faithless, and hypocritical. Today, I sympathize. I realize many of them have children in college, or family members who rely on medical insurance, or family systems that would completely reject them. They've counted the cost and decided the cost is too high.

When I was a teenager, I would have despised them. Today, I applaud them. They are discerning people. Making sure your children have the resources to graduate from college or that your wife has medical care is often more important than making a theological point. I say "often" because sometimes the cost to ourselves is so high that we have no choice.

Two weeks ago, I told you of my struggle with whether to resign from my first pastorate. I told you of finding Nicole's graduation card and of deciding it was a sign from God that I shouldn't resign. Looking back, the reason I didn't want to resign was because of how much that might cost my family and my friends. I worried whether we could survive on Angie's income. I worried the church

would disintegrate without my leadership. I worried about what people would think of me if I quit. I counted the costs for others and decided to stay.

What I didn't count was the cost to myself. I was exhausted and discouraged. My theology had changed and I knew these people didn't want to hear it. The longer I stayed, the more miserable I became. The cost for my self finally became too high.

Friends, discernment is an incredibly personal process. What makes sense for you in your situation in your time may not make sense to me. What I decided yesterday may not be right for today. Ultimately, each of us must make the best decision we can make, aware that we will make mistakes. And one of those mistakes is to fail to carefully count the cost.

When we fail to count the cost, we often do damage to ourselves and others. When we fail to count the cost, we often ignore our limitations. When we fail to count the cost, we often promise to do what we cannot. We tell God and others what we think they want to hear rather than what is true.

Discernment is not a process by which we convince ourselves to do what we cannot. It is the process of honestly admitting and accepting who we are and what we are capable of. It is admitting what we can obey and what we cannot.

When I was a teenager, I thought I could obey the commands of Jesus. Today, I am finally aware of what I am unwilling and of what I am incapable of obeying. I finally understand another teaching of Jesus.

Jesus said there was once a man with two sons. He went to the first and said, "Son, go and work today in the vineyard." He answered, "I will not," but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, "I will, sir," but he did not.

Jesus asked, "Which of these two did what his father wanted?"

The son or daughter of God who is most honest about what they are unwilling or incapable of doing is also the son or daughter of God who is most likely to eventually please God. May we learn to be honest about the costs, to be willing to disobey, and to be open to that moment when we can finally do what we sense to be best.