

The Cost of Discipleship

Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

I wonder how many of you remember this Tammy Wynette country classic:

Our little boy came up to his mama in the kitchen this evening

While she was fixing supper

And he handed her a piece of paper he'd been writin' on

And after wipin' her hands on her apron she read it and this is what it said

For mowing the yard 5 dollars

For making my own bed this week 1 dollar

For going to the store 50 cents

For playing with my little brother while you went shopping 25 cents

For taking out the trash 1 dollar

For getting a good report card 5 dollars

And for raking the yard 2 dollars

Total amount owed 14 dollars and 75 cents

I grew up in less enlightened times and if I'd pulled a stunt like that I'd have been cuffed around the ear and sent to my room for a month. In the song the mother goes on to sing of how she had carried the child for 9 months, cooked, cleaned, and nursed, and that at the end of it all for her love there was no charge. At the end of the song the pushy urchin, with tears in his eyes, no doubt from the smack he'd possibly received, wrote a big note that said, 'paid in full'.

It is foolish to attempt to put a price on unconditional love. When it comes to the relationship Jesus has with humanity, it is an empty exercise to ask of Jesus, "How much do you love me?" All Jesus has to do is to remind us of His teaching, of His healing, of His kindness, and, ultimately, all He needs to do is to point to the cross. "I love you that much", says Jesus.

It becomes a trickier question when you turn it around. What if Jesus were to ask you, "How much do you love Me?"

Let's clear up one thing in the reading from Luke's gospel – where Jesus uses the word 'hate'. There are times in the life of faith when we need to quell the internal literalist that most of us have at times when we read the Bible. Jesus is **not** saying that the only way to follow Him is to hate our parents, children, or ourselves. Different cultures use words in different ways, and in the time of Jesus, the use of the word 'hate' in this context was a piece of Jewish hyperbole. In this instance it means 'to turn away from, to detach oneself from'. "There is nothing of that emotion we experience in the expression, 'I hate you.'"ⁱ That would run against everything the Bible, and Jesus Himself taught. But it's still strong stuff, and what I think it means is this. In the competing network of many loyalties in which all of us live, to family, friends, colleagues, the claim of Jesus and the gospel not only takes precedence, but, in fact redefines all our other relationships. That's big enough. To love Jesus as much as that helps us love those around us. It doesn't exclude them, it includes them. And that's costly.

That is one of the things that we wrestle with in our lives of faith. Cost and discipleship. There is a cost to following Jesus. It doesn't come easily or cheaply to most of us. It means we are looking at, evaluating, considering how we live our lives, how we relate to Jesus, and how that informs and transforms the way we relate to everything else. Our relationship with people, our relationship with work, our relationship to the Church, our relationship to how we spend our time, our relationship with money.

Is this tough – you bet your life it is! Is this hard – of course it is. Any kind of commitment is difficult, demanding and requires effort on our part. It's natural that we like things to be easy and not too consuming of our efforts. We've a lot on our plates; we're busy people. We need to compartmentalise and prioritise to fit everything in. Jesus knows that. But He suggests also that if we are to be fit for purpose, for kingdom purpose, we need to be sure what it is that we are doing.

In another metaphor that's not meant to be taken literally (salt never loses its saltiness) Jesus asks what would be the point of salt if it didn't flavour and add taste to cooking. His point is – what is the point of saying you're a Christian if you don't show your Christianity in the way you

think, speak and behave? What He's asking is, "Do you know what you're doing? Do you realise what this means?"

Jesus has been followed by crowds in this travelling section of His ministry. People have been impressed. People have been moved. People have been challenged. People have been made to think. And that is all good. But there comes a point when Jesus has to ask them, "Are you sure? Are you really sure you want to follow me?" It's not just about what you feel, or think. It's not even simply about what you believe. It is about what you are going to do with your life for the sake of Jesus Christ.

On Covenant Sunday there is no greater question. That question has always mattered, and it matters still today.

It's not about becoming the next Mother Theresa or Desmond Tutu. It's not about selling up everything you have and giving it away and living like a hermit in the Hermitage. It's about being as clear as you can be that the yardstick against which you measure your life is Jesus. His example, His teaching, His practice. In the little things as well as the big things.

There is a cost to discipleship.

Not everyone is called to be a disciple. Discipleship goes a step further than being a responsible human being. Although discipleship is not always in conflict with other allegiances, sometimes it is, turning us against the flow of the way of the world when it comes to reordering duties and affections. Jesus does not say that it will be easy. But neither does He say it is impossible.

At the heart of discipleship is transformation. The cost of discipleship is engaging in a profoundly radical shift towards ethics that shapes everything that we are. There is no driftwood in discipleship. We are invited, and note I say invited, to pay attention to Jesus so that we might make it our intention to follow Jesus.

A child asking me how to help the Syrian refugees, decided to give her pocket money to one of the aid charities. All of it. That's discipleship. A 96 year old lady, frail and living with pain, deciding to hold a coffee morning in her home to raise money for a small charity that was struggling to help people who didn't have enough food. That's discipleship. People in our pews,

giving up their time when frankly they could be doing something else, to staff charity shops, to go on to coffee rotas, to visit isolated people, to work with our children. That's discipleship. It is often costly; it often requires a level of commitment that we grumble at. But we know, I mean we **really** know, that it matters more than anything else, because it is what makes the world better. And it is also what makes our faith visible.

Jesus exaggerates by using the 'hate' word when He talked about discipleship. You've got to 'hate' family, or friends, or other things, if you're going to follow Me. He says something shocking as a means to a greater end. Becoming a disciple means going into the deep places of lives, where we have to leave behind selfishness and self-absorption, and trust Him Who will help us. Jesus doesn't scold us, He encourages us. It is an encouragement to hold nothing back, to be all that God has shaped us to be.

"The alternative is a life of regret. In Anne Tyler's novel *The Amateur Marriage*, Michael Anton is an 80 year old man looking back on his uneventful life. He has made some mistakes, but he has avoided all the big moral pitfalls. He can say he never cheated anyone or tossed anyone aside. Michael is filled with regret, though. He wishes "he had inhabited more of his life, used it better, filled it fuller."

That, I suspect, is not only the cost of, but the invitation to, discipleship. It reorders priorities; it asks big questions; it makes huge demands. But when we follow, life is fuller, greater, brighter. The world is better, for the world is changed.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Fred B Craddock, Interpretation, Luke p181