

## Things You Should Know

Luke 14:25-33

A little over a year ago we confirmed a group of six middle schoolers, and I directed my sermon to them that morning and simply invited you all to listen in. We're at the other end of that process now, about to start a group of nine middle and senior high youth on their journey towards confirmation, and once again I'd like to direct my comments today toward them (and their mentors), and invite you all to eavesdrop.

So, Julia, Carolee, Linden, Joseph, Mark, Kristin, Sean, Shannon and Drew: you are about to take the next step on your journey of discipleship. Notice that I didn't say "begin" your journey, because most of you have been in church your whole lives. You are already on this journey. What this will be is a time for you to study, and learn, and maybe even wrestle with the faith. You didn't come into the church on your own. You came because your parents brought you. You came because of *their* faith. Confirmation is a time for you to claim that faith as your own, to get you to the day where you will stand in front of your church family and publicly profess that faith for yourself. But before you do, there are some things you should know.

Here is the very first thing you should know: Discipleship costs. Now, I'm not talking about money—dues, or tithing, giving to the church, not that kind of cost, although if you are true disciples your money is no longer your own. In fact, nothing is your own, and that is part of what you need to know going into this. Being a true Christian, a true disciple, has more to do with giving up than getting. It is more about sacrifice than benefit. Being a disciple will cost you something.

I'm not sure we've done a good job either teaching you that or modeling it for you ourselves. As 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, you have grown up in a culture that is more geared towards getting stuff, not giving up stuff. Now, this hasn't been some grand or intentional plot to turn us into a selfish nation. I'm no historian, but here's what I think happened. I think that our parents and grandparents who lived through the really tough years of the Depression and WWII decided that as long as they could help it, we would never have to do without; we would never have to know the hardship that they endured. And so by the time you came along we had created a culture of rewards and privileges unlike any previous generation has known. Most of you have had everything you need, and almost everything you wanted. Despite what you may think, you have not had it hard, and if we have pushed you a bit to succeed, it is only because we have wanted you to do well in life and to continue to have a comfortable, easy life.

And all those same ideas have found their way into the church, I'm afraid. Just like we did with your lives, we've made church easy. What's happened is that in the past few decades the church has been like a pendulum and swung away from the idea of a harsh, demanding, judgmental God. But we didn't just stop with a God who is gracious and loving. We kept going and ended up with a completely de-clawed God. We made him Santa-like. A recent study of American teens—Christian teens—indicates that what we've raised you to believe in is a God who only asks of us is that we do our very best to be kind and good, or at the very least try hard to be nice to each other, and in return God will help us on tests we didn't study enough for, and heal us when we are sick, and take us to heaven when we die. God is the guy who can get us what we want.

And as for the Christian life itself, your parents and grandparents rebelled against the whole notion that it is strict and dull and all about following rules, and we have run, not walked in the opposite direction—the Christian life is the good life. We've de-clawed church. We tend to emphasize fellowship at church more than we do study or service. We don't expect a lot of people, whether it's memorizing scripture or tithing or giving their time and energy. We said that we want our kids to think that church is a fun place to be, so we made youth ministry mostly about pizza and games and entertainment. We have let you believe, taught you to believe, that being a Christian is a lot of fun and easy; a good life choice.

But Jesus never talked about privileges or the perks of being a Christian. He never made it sound like it would be a lot of fun, that life would be better or easier for us than it would be for anyone else. In fact, he made it sound like it just might be harder. A lot would be expected of you. A lot would be required of you. Like giving up your possessions. Forsaking your family.

It's not that God is just mean or loves a martyr. It isn't even that God thinks we grow best and become better people if we have to go through struggles and make sacrifices. What Jesus wants to make sure that we understand is that discipleship is a process of becoming wholly attached and committed to God. It isn't about following the rules or being a good person. It's about giving your whole, complete, entire self over to God, devoting yourself only to God.

And that doesn't just happen. It won't just happen if you come to church once a week, or even if you go to Sunday School or your youth group. Being a disciple takes discipline – it's the same root word, isn't it? It takes time, and it takes effort on your part. Setting time aside each day to study scripture, and to pray. Finding a small group of friends you can talk to about what God is doing in your life, and who will hold you accountable when you aren't doing it so well. As old-fashioned as it sounds, it takes memorization of scripture, letting God's Word make its home in your heart and mind.

And yes, it takes sacrifice. Discipleship is about attaching yourself to God, and in order to attach to God, we have to let go of our attachments on earth. Jesus said that we would have to give up our possessions, but he might just as easily have said that we have to give up the things that possess us; things we love more than we love God. Things we trust more than we trust God. Things we count on to keep us safe and secure more than we count on God.

Like, maybe, your family. Or your money and possessions. Maybe it's your reputation – maybe it's more important to you to have the respect and admiration of your peers than it is God's. Maybe it is whatever your gift is, whatever it is that you are good at and accomplished in – maybe sports, maybe academics or your job, maybe your musical ability. If you are inclined to take all the glory for it and find yourself agreeing with people that you are, indeed, pretty amazing, that may be what it will cost you to be a disciple of Jesus. Maybe it's your hopes and dreams, if what you hope for and dream of aren't the same things God has planned for you.

Most of you know about Habitat for Humanity, the organization that builds basic, affordable housing for people in need. What you may not know is that it was founded by a guy who was a millionaire. What happened is that he found that the more money he made, the more successful

he became, the less he needed God, the less he thought about God and the less he loved God. So he gave it all away and started Habitat.

I have another story for you, one that is closer to home. A few weeks ago a little group of us went to Waverley Road Presbyterian Church in Kingsport to hear them talk about how they have expanded their mid-week program to include children from the community. When they started out their goal was to tutor low-income kids who needed some extra help with their school work and some adult support and care, as well as Christian Education. This is a church full of very well-educated, upper-middle-class folks, and they had never done anything like that before; they had never encountered the kinds of problems a lot of those kids live with on a daily basis, and they were completely unprepared for the kinds of problems they had to deal with, and honestly, they were overwhelmed by what it demanded of them.

What I remember most about that meeting is what one of the women said about why they kept at it, and what they got out of it. She said that it taught them to rely on God. They had never had to do that before as a church. They had always been strong and in control, and now they weren't. They had to trust God to help them, because they knew they couldn't do it on their own.

Being disciples of Jesus cost them their sense of safety and independence, but I think they would all tell you that it has been well worth the price. It has not been an easy road for them, but it has been a joyful one. And that is probably the lesson we need to be teaching you and modeling for you. Discipleship costs, but it is well worth whatever price we have to pay. Giving up *safe* and *easy* in exchange for *joy* and *peace* is not a bad trade off.

May God bless each one of you as you take this next step, and may God give us the wisdom and strength to be good teachers, good disciples.