

## Sermon: The Cost of Discipleship

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, September 7, 2025)

There is a scene in *Braveheart*, the 1995 movie directed and starred by Mel Gibson, as the legendary Scottish warrior William Wallace, rising up against the English oppression under King Edward the First. Midway through the movie, when the Scottish forces were mustered to confront an overwhelming English army, three times their size and with heavy calvary of 300 horses, a young Scottish foot soldier asked, "Are we going to fight?" His older, more experienced companion replied, "Nay, the nobles will negotiate, they will do a deal, then we go home."

But Wallace, with his band of highlanders, with blue paint on their faces, and a steely look of determination in their eyes, begged to differ. He rallied the troops, reminded the sons of Scotland of their status as 'freemen', and with a catchy slogan "they may take our lives, but they will never take away our freedom", Wallace and his followers charged against the English, and against all odds, miraculously won the day. I don't know how accurate it was historically, but it is a fabulous story illustrating a tried and tested doctrine of war, that victory is not won on paper but on the battle field. However, Jesus seems to suggest otherwise in our Scripture reading today of Luke 14, more specifically in verse 31-32, "*Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.*" Of course, Jesus was not giving advice on war strategy (for if he was, I am not sure if we or anyone else should be taking it). Rather, Jesus is talking about calculating the cost of following him, the cost of discipleship.

This term for "cost", or *dapane* in Greek, appears only once in the New Testament, and it is here in Luke 14. Cost involves sacrifice, perhaps a measure of loss, in order to acquire, maintain or produce something else. Cost must be weighed and set in balance against what is gained, in order to determine if such a trade-off is fair. When cost is measured against discipleship, against the accepting and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, one can see the power of this call and the commitment it demands of us as hearers and doers of the word.

The bad news of the Gospel is that Jesus set for us, in Luke 14, a unimaginable high cost of following him. Let me lay out for you the three

seemingly impossible requirements: First, *“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”* (v.26) It is then followed by the next verse, 27, *“Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciples.”* It is capped off with this final demand in verse 33, *“So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”*

Ouch! Discipleship or not, who can pay such a high cost? Let us parse these, and to see how one might try to explain these requirements, not away, but at least soften the blow.

First off, hate is really a strong word. This requirement to hate should really be read as a hyperbole, not to be taken literally. We have seen elsewhere Jesus engaging in a bit of exaggeration in order to make a point, such as plucking out an eye, or cutting off a hand in order not to sin (in Matthew 5), or a camel passing through the eye of a needle (in Matthew 19). Hyperbole sayings of Jesus should not be taken literally but seriously. In the case of ‘hate’, a better way to understand it is looking at the comparable passage of Matthew 10:37, *“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”* Jesus is not telling us not to love others, only that our love and affection of others must not take priority over our love for God.

Ok, on to the bit about carrying the cross and follow. Cross in the context of 1st century Judea was a form of execution imposed by the Romans, not against petty criminals, but against the most serious of offenders, those challenging the rule of Rome. The cross was a brutal punishment, a slow agonizing death designed to deter anyone wishing to follow the same footsteps. It was a symbol of shame, of failure, of defeat, of perpetual subjugation under the imperial rule of Rome. No one in the right mind should embrace that path, that symbol, let alone walking towards it, or following it. Biblical scholars sometimes get into this debate about carrying the cross of Jesus, or carrying one’s own cross. I am not sure if that really makes a difference for me or you. Literal or hyperbole, this teaching of Jesus is clear: the path of discipleship involves suffering, perhaps even death. It is certainly not for the faint of hearts.

Finally, let’s look at the last requirement, of giving up all possessions. Here is a command that borderlines the absolute. Certainly many commentators have tried to water it down by explaining the phrase ‘giving up’ as not allowing oneself to be possessed by material possessions. It is

helpful to be reminded that we are not to think of ourselves as owners of earthly riches, but merely stewards put in charge by the Creator God to manager what is entrusted to us. Nevertheless, the disciples of Jesus, by and large, practiced this requirement literally—they gave up everything just to follow the Lord. The early Church in Jerusalem, as described in the Acts of the Apostles, practiced this teaching of Jesus with believers willingly and happily selling their properties, and placing that wealth at the feet of the Apostles for use by the Church. Understandably that practice died off over time, and for good reason as it was open to a whole range of abuses, as we have seen throughout the history of the Church over the past two thousand years. Yet these words of Jesus stand, *“So, therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”*

Taking these three costly price of discipleship together, one is left with this inevitable question: who can pay such a high cost? Certainly not many, and if I am brutally honest, certainly not me. If such is the cost of discipleship, of following Jesus, and if one is to measure this cost ahead of time before committing oneself to the way, this Jesus Way is certainly a narrow path through an even narrower door.

Perhaps Jesus was merely trying to thin out the crowd. Given the context of his time, when many were only following to witness miracles, to be wowed by signs and wonders, I could see the logic in thinning out the crowd. Jesus had wanted only the true believers who were committed to the cause, not a bunch of nominal Christians who only show up twice a year at church, on Easter Sunday and on Christmas Eve. But how does a preacher like myself preach a passage like this, in such a current context where thinning out the crowd in the church is a bit oxymoronic. And to be honest, look around here, what crowd?

There is a good reason that preacher like me should stay away from this passage of Luke 14 on the cost of discipleship. It is a hard teaching, with very little grace to be found. I wrestled and struggled with it the past couple of weeks, lost sleep over it. I had successfully evaded it the past 18 years, preaching through the Lectionary. Given that Lectionary cycle is three years, that would mean I had chosen not to preach on it at least 5 times previously. If the cost of discipleship as outlined by Jesus is not something I am willing to pay, is not something I can truly measured ahead of time, what more can I say or add to this text, that you would not find it hypocritical, sanctimonious, just like the Pharisees.

I turned to my favourite author and pastor Eugene Peterson, who knew enough to place Luke 14 in the larger context of the ‘Samaritan

Travel Discourse', from Luke 9 to 19, where Jesus journeys through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. Peterson wrote a whole book on this discourse, titled: *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers*, where he brilliantly and painstakingly explores a number of parables and teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Yet, when it comes to the cost of discipleship in Luke 14, even Eugene Peterson knew, wisely enough to stay away from this passage. Not a peep out of him.

I tried to turn to Saint Francis of Assisi for inspiration, who had actually given up all his earthly possessions and took the vow of poverty. Now there is an individual who had paid the high cost of following Jesus. What he represented is an absolute indictment on the opulence of the Catholic Church under Pope Innocence III in the 13th century. I've done a bit of digging on the life of Saint Francis, and I was even prepared to talk about the painting by Giovanni Bellini in today's bulletin cover, but what happened a couple of days ago really soured my mood. The Catholic Church, in its divine wisdom, saw fit to canonize a fifteen year old as saint: Saint Acutis of Assisi (from the same town as Francis, no less). It would seem this fifteen year old, who unfortunately died of cancer two decades ago, who was a bit of a gamer and computer geek, who had set up a website tracking miracles, who would be the first 'millennial saint', turning the hearts and minds of other millennials back to the Church. I won't bore you with details of how he was canonized, you can google it yourselves. But from my humble opinion, it all smoke and mirrors, all piety-less propaganda.

I am no saint, just a worm, just an ordinary preacher trying to figure out how to preach grace on a passage that has truly stumped me. As I buried my head on my wife's lap in utter desperation, explaining my predicament, this is what Daisy had to say, "The cost of discipleship? That's easy because Jesus had already paid it!" In that ahah moment of clarity, it was as if a light bulb came on. That's right! Why didn't I think of that? Of course, Jesus paid the price. He is the one who loves the Father above all else; he is the one who gives up all creature comfort, all earthly possessions for us; he is the one carries the cross and died for all of us in obedience to the Father. And on that cross, he paid the ultimate cost, and all we are left to say, all any of us can say is 'glory'.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**