Sunday, September 9, 2001
COUNTING THE COST
Luke 14:25-33

There are some teachings of Jesus in the New Testament that cause one to ask, “Did he really say that?” The scripture reading read earlier is a good example. According to Luke’s gospel, one day when large crowds were traveling with him, Jesus turned and said to them, “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.”

This is not a good text to use for a Mother’s Day sermon, or Father’s Day, or a sermon on positive and helpful family values. But on second thought, maybe it would. We’ll consider that later.

Let’s begin by examining the context of this seemingly harsh statement. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and he sensed that it would be his final trip. Large crowds were now following him, and he knew that some of the people were following for the wrong reasons. They enjoyed his popularity. They liked it when he was critical of some of their religious authorities. It was Galilee versus Jerusalem, peasants versus power, laity versus establishment. They were impressed by his miracles. They believed they were gaining status by being a part of the crowd. Was it a parade? Obviously, the crowd thought so, and almost everybody loves a parade. Many in the crowd were oblivious to any conflict, any price to pay, any cost to bear.

Here’s what the crowd who followed him didn’t know: it was a funeral procession more than a parade of triumph. So Jesus turned and warned them: think about what you are doing and decide if you are willing to stay with me all the way.

“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.”

The Biblical commentaries and scholars I consulted this past week as I studied this passage and prepared this sermon said that the term “to hate” in this context is a Semitic expression meaning “to turn away from,” or “to detach oneself from.” It is not meant to describe that emotion when we say to someone in anger, “I hate you.” Were that the case, then these statements would cancel all the calls to love, to care, to nourish, especially in regard to one’s own family found throughout the Bible.

And to hate one’s own life is not a call to self-loathing, to regard oneself as a worm, or to toss oneself on the trash heap of the world. It means here to turn away from self-centeredness and the worship of self.

Not only did Jesus use many common Semitic expressions in his teachings, but he also used hyperbole. Recall some of his teachings from the Sermon on the Mount: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away... If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away.”

Jesus is saying, “If you are going to follow me, that can and will necessarily involve some detaching yourself from other loyalties and some turning away. Is the price more than you are willing to pay? Do you know what you are doing? Do you realize what this means?”

He then used parables to further illustrate what he was saying. In one parable, he said, “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether you have enough to complete it? Otherwise, when you have laid the foundation and are not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule you, saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'”

When it comes to our religious faith and commitment, Jesus is pointing out that too many people attempt to travel through life’s journey on a kind of double track. On Saturday or Sunday, they are glad to attend a worship service and listen to a sermon and engage in prayer. They may even be stirred momentarily. But as soon as they are back at their daily schedule, at home, the shop, the school, the office, or the factory, it is as if they had turned a switch. There they look at the others around them only as associates or competitors, not as neighbors or as children of God created in God’s image. There they strive for proficiency and success, with never a thought of whether or not their actions are pleasing in the eyes of God. After the rushing and work, they go chasing after diversion, never stopping to think that a person truly finds re-creation by facing the question: Where am I, and where is all this taking me after all?

I think Jesus looked at the crowd following him, (you and I are among them) and he could see that many of these people were unhappy and without peace. Why? Because their lives are so divided. They want a little bit of God, but not too much. They want a little bit of eternity, but not so much that it will seriously change their lives. They pray, “Thy Kingdom come,” and under their breath they add, “but not yet.” They are walking off balance. Halfway living with God and halfway living without God are sure to make anyone unhappy. On the one hand, you can no longer hate, love, enjoy yourself, or cheat with a whole heart, for inside you there burns a tormenting question: where do I stand, and what does all this I am doing look like in the eyes of God?

When you are only half-way committed to following the way of God, you might even envy those who are living completely without God. They have no inhibitions. They are having so much fun. They do not feel bad about being stingy and self-centered. They do not bother themselves with such sentimentalities as being concerned about cheating their customers or a little adultery without too many bumps and bruises on their conscience.

Even if you are only halfway committed to following God’s ways, you have some inhibitions and troubles in your conscience about such things. You can no longer be tough, red-blooded sinners like these others, but you are also lacking the higher joys of peace with God. You are caught in between.

The person who wants only a bit of God always finds God to be only a brake, an impediment, a pain. But the one who is totally committed knows the joy of having a sense of purpose, direction, power, and joy in life and of hearing God and others say at the end of life, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

What is true in your religious commitment is also true in other parts of your life. If you truly want to succeed in something worthwhile, there is a cost involved. Are you willing to pay the price? Do you want to be an outstanding athlete, an Olympic swimmer perhaps? There is a cost involved — years of daily training and discipline. Do you want to be a physician who works at improving people’s lives? There is a cost involved — years of study, training, and practice, and then keeping up with the newest developments in the field.

Here is why this story from Luke's gospel might be a very appropriate text for Mother's Day, or Father's Day, or Family Life Sunday. Good parents know there is a cost involved in being good parents. There is risk, and there is sacrifice. They also know that the greatest gift they can give to their children is the importance of learning how to endure, how to focus, and how not to be caught up in every crowd that comes along. Good parents also teach their children that as they grow up, they will naturally grow away from too much of an attachment to them. As adults, their children need to become their own persons and make tough choices, and some of these choices could detach them from their families.

In every worthwhile activity we pursue, there is a cost. Carl Lewis, after he won the gold medal in the 1984 Olympics, was asked how many years he'd spent developing his tremendous skills? He replied, "The day I stopped crawling, I took up running."

In 1949, an unknown scientist started work seeking a cure for a devastating disease known as polio. He worked 16 to 18 hours a day, six days a week, for five years. The ultimate discovery of a polio vaccine changed the world.

There are no easy ways to acquire excellence in any field. We must count the cost and be willing to pay the price, and the cost is inner discipline and endurance. It's no accident that the word "discipline" comes from the word "disciple," meaning to follow a certain way or teacher. It means focus, which always implies turning away from other pursuits.

I don't know if, in our time, we are too much different than in earlier years, but it seems to me that we live in a culture in which too many people expect fame, quick promotions, fast profit, speedy solutions to complex problems, and even instant maturity. At the same time, we shy away from commitment.

On the other hand, there are many people that I admire very much because of what they have been able to do with their God-given abilities. They are what I would define as being successful — not because of the amount of money they have made, because some of the people I admire the most have not made a lot of money, and they are not famous. Here is a person who has been a dedicated classroom teacher for more than 30 years and has done more good than you or I can imagine. I admire such people because they are fulfilling their potential. They have focus. They live from the inside out. They find their joy in serving others. They possess the character quality of discipline. They are willing to pay the price and thus have a sense of fulfillment and joy in their everyday lives.

And then I've known other people who have followed one crowd, one fad, and then another. Everything they attempt is only done halfway. Whatever seemed popular at the time, they joined up. But when the going got a bit rough, they dropped away and looked for something else to purpose and often have a successive string of setbacks and failures.

If you asked them, "What happened?" They might answer, if they are truthful, "I started to let things slide. I got careless. I didn't follow through. I lacked endurance. I stopped doing my homework one day. I started missing classes. I didn't get to work on time. I lost my focus. I became complacent. I thought problems would solve themselves. I neglected my spiritual nourishment. When the going got rough I gave up and quit."

There is one more question in this matter of do so in advance? Can we make an estimate of what being faithful will cost us? The answer is no! At least not in the same way as a person building a building can make an estimate or obtain a bid. To make an estimate of costs, one

must know beforehand the important items that enter into it. We cannot know in advance what obstacles lie ahead of us in our life's journey and in our attempt to be faithful.

In the same way on the positive side of the ledger, when you do your best to be faithful, to endure, to make a commitment and keep it, you cannot know accurately in advance what happiness it will bring you to have peace with God and therefore peace in your own life. You can only look at those who have gone before you and learn from them what joy they obtained from being faithful and committed. Then you have to decide whether it was worth it or not. I hope you will decide that it is worth it. Amen.