

WHAT WE'VE GOTTEN OURSELVES INTO

Psalms 139:1-6, 13-18

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Luke 14:25-33

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TEXT: Luke 14:28-30 "Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid the foundation and is unable to finish, all who see him will ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

PURPOSE: To assure us that, even though the cost of being Christ's disciples seems to be more than we're willing to give, that the grace and mercy of Jesus will enable us to follow him in faith.

There are passages in scripture which demand that, before the preacher takes to preaching, a bit of Bible study is in order. Today's passage from the Gospel of Luke is a prime example. How can Jesus say that unless we *hate* our family members and even our life, we can't be his disciple? (Luke 14:26) Wait a minute! Some of us have heard our children tell us that they hate us, but we'd never imagine Jesus saying that's a good thing. How can the teacher who told us to love even our enemies not want to also to love our family members?

Here's where some Bible study helps. The word translated 'hate' doesn't refer to hostility or anger. It carries more a meaning of, to let go of, to detach oneself from. It would be closer to the intention expressed here to render it this way: "Whoever holds family relationships as more important than following me cannot be my disciple." That's still upsetting, but it also helps to look at the context. The passage begins with the report that "large crowds were traveling with him." At this point in his ministry, Jesus was immensely popular, and people tagged along, curious as to what he might do next. But Jesus was not interested in attracting large crowds. He was interested in forming disciples, and his intention was to warn those tagalong crowds that real discipleship was costly. Family loyalties are just one of many things that will be impacted by becoming his disciple. And, for the first people who read Luke's Gospel, they would have found this warning to be right on the mark. For many converts to Christianity, either the whole family was converted, or the convert experienced the rejection of his or her family. End of Bible study.

Now for the sermon, the title of which is, "What Have we Gotten Ourselves Into?" What have we gotten ourselves into? We've gotten ourselves into becoming a follower of Jesus. We've accepted him as our Lord and Savior, and we've embarked on the discipleship adventure. But what does discipleship require of us? Making following Jesus more important than our commitments to family? Taking up our cross? What if, after we've started following him, we begin to realize that discipleship is more demanding than we thought it would be? Put it in terms of the twin parables in today's passage: what if we started building that tower and then realized we didn't have the resources to finish? Or what if we've already fired the first shot in that war and then realized we've underestimated the strength of the

forces opposing us? Now what?

I think this is the situation most Christians are in. We've made a decision to follow Jesus. We've had some experience of his redeeming love, and we've chosen to accept his offer of new life in him. But somewhere along the way, the demands of discipleship started feeling like they were more than we bargained for. I'm not just referring to supporting our church, although, that effort can be rather daunting, what with requests to help with fundraisers, and committee work, and all the other things a church needs from its members to function. Discipleship involves the whole person in our social setting, and it calls on us to embrace values and make choices which often are at odds with the values and choices endorsed by the dominant culture.

Here's one thing our discipleship adventure has gotten us into, which we celebrated this morning: the faith formation of our young people. What a joy it is that this church is blessed with the children who are part of us. What a blessing that there are adults among us who are willing to commit themselves to shaping the spiritual lives of our children.

But let's be honest: the faith formation of young people is a marathon. It's incredibly rewarding when the kids are young, and the parents still retain enough control over their children's schedules to get them here reasonably often. But then, adolescence comes along, and parents lose the ability to make teenagers come to church, and the church doesn't know how to, or can't muster the energy to, shape a ministry of faith formation that connects with young people as they mature. We've gotten ourselves into the work of shaping the faith of young people, but we didn't realize completing that work would be so difficult.

The tragedy of this is that young people who were introduced to the faith as children don't get the opportunity to explore the relevance of faith to their lives as they mature and face immense pressures to follow influences other than Jesus. This is a huge challenge for the church in our time, because we are the stewards of precisely the resources young people need to face what's coming at them with courage, integrity, wisdom, and compassion. We have witnessed the terrifying consequences of allowing young people to transition to adulthood apart from the connections and the values available through following Jesus.

There is, unfortunately, no recipe for seeing the faith formation of our children through to adulthood. Only this: it's what we've gotten ourselves into, and

it's unquestionably costly to finish what we've started. Following through will certainly involve all of us, not just parents and teachers, connecting with our children and shaping our life together as a church in ways that continue to connect with those children as they grow. That will probably cost us, but here we are, with a half-built tower. Here we are, with a battle against the forces seeking the souls of our children barely started. Here we are, with children who are learning what it's like to belong to Christian community yet to discover the full power of faith and faith community as they begin to find their way into a world full of dangers, toils, and snares.

The way not to be overwhelmed by the costs of discipleship is to pay attention to the joys. There are few blessings more energizing to a community of faith than the presence of some teenagers who are passionate about putting their faith to work. Teenagers have a nose for hypocrisy, and can be quick to call out a church which isn't being true to its values. They want their church to stand for something, to have courage and zeal. All this can be disconcerting, but it sure is proof that a church is alive. I was active in church when I was a teenager, as were a small group of my friends. We were concerned about the war in Viet Nam, about civil rights, about the environment. We turned to church to guide our thinking, and, thanks be to God, our church engaged us around those issues, and gave us space to wrestle with them, in our youth group, in worship services, and in the coffeehouse it let us set up in an unused room in the basement. I'll bet the pastor and lay leadership took some heat for allowing us to do what we did. But I'll also bet the church realized how important it was for us to be exploring the great social issues of the day in a community seeking to be disciples of Christ.

Today, the issues are different, but once again, young people are standing for a safer, more peaceful, more sustainable world. This is nowhere more evident than in their efforts to curb climate change. Maybe you've heard of Greta Thunberg, the sixteen year old Swedish girl who started the school climate strike movement back in August of 2018. Greta began by simply walking out of school one Friday and standing in protest to governmental inaction with regard to global warming outside the Swedish Parliament. Her witness drew attention, and soon, students were engaging in 'climate strikes' in many places around the world. Now, on the last two Fridays of this month, the climate strike movement is organizing huge events all around the world. We probably will see action right here in New Hampshire.

The young people involved in this movement are convinced that we humans need to drastically change our ways if this planet will be inhabitable for humans by

the time they are as old as we are. These kids are deeply invested in this cause. For them, it is a life-and-death issue. What would it be like if teenage climate activists were involved in a church? They would be expecting us to change the ways we do things, but also, they would be receiving from their church the resources of faith to support their action – resources that begin with the profound theology behind the song, “He’s got the whole world in his hands.” Resources that remind us that God expects us to be faithful caretakers of the world we inhabit. Resources that naturally locate those young people in a multigenerational community where elders are blessed with the zeal of young people, and young people are blessed with the wisdom of their elders.

Yes, we’ve gotten ourselves into the important work of shaping the faith-life of our children. And yes, that work inevitably will experience what in the tower-building business are called ‘cost overruns.’ It has been, and will be, easy enough to conclude that we’ve done as much as we can do when our children reach the age when the Sunday School model of faith formation no longer works. But here’s what I have experienced happens right when we are wondering how in the world we will be able to finish what we started with any of the challenges involved in the discipleship adventure. *Jesus happens.* Jesus wants us to be his disciples. He wants us to step away from the tagalong crowd and make a costly commitment. But he knows that the cost of discipleship can feel unmanageable for us. And since he loves us beyond what we can imagine, he steps in, and takes care of the cost, in ways that are bound to surprise us. “Seek first God’s realm and God’s righteousness,” Jesus urged, “And all these things” – all the concerns we have about life, and family, and time, and finances– “will be taken care of.” (Matthew 6:33; my rendering) That’s the challenge, and the promise, of what we’ve gotten ourselves into.

We’ve gotten ourselves into a relationship with Jesus, the one who issued the challenge and guaranteed the promise with his life. Jesus knows us better than we know ourselves. He loves us with a love that will not let us go, and he wants, more than anything, for us to share his life, the only life which is fully triumphant over sin and death. We deal with what we’ve gotten ourselves into day by day. Some days it’s a joy to give our whole selves to the discipleship adventure; some days it doesn’t even show up on our to-do list. Some days we’re all excited about the possibilities emerging from following him; some days we see the cross he wants us to carry and we can’t stand the thought of it. Through it all, day by day, he does not abandon us. He watches for our willingness, and supports it. He recognizes our resistance, and loves us through it. He hangs in there with us, until we are so filled with the joy of following him that we completely forget about the cost.