

September 4, 2016, 16th Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: Jesus pays the cost for us.

In today's Gospel lesson, we have two stories.

One is about a man who starts out boldly to build a tower. But then in a classic blunder, he finishes the foundation, realizes he doesn't have enough money, and has to stop. Uncompleted. Everyone who goes by mocks him.

The other is about a king with an army of ten thousand. He decides that he can't beat the king with an army with twenty thousand, so he cuts his losses and asks for terms of peace. Presumably, since everyone knows who would win this hypothetical battle, he's not going to get a particularly great deal.

Your question then for today: Which of these two do you think Jesus is calling us to be?

You can either be brave, but foolish—like the builder, or you can be wise, but cowardly—like the king.

When I was a small child, in a story that my mom remembers well, I was like the brave and foolish builder. She had just finished giving me a bath, and was ready to take me out of the tub to dry me off, when I said to her, "I love you, Mom, but I have to love God more."

This story would be funny if it didn't hurt so much. In today's Gospel, Jesus asks us to consider the cost. He asks us to consider the cost that we agreed to pay when we were washed, not in the bathtub, but in our baptisms. The cost that we affirmed during our confirmations. The cost includes promises, such as "learning to trust God, proclaiming Christ through word and deed, caring for others and the world God made, and working for justice and peace."

To be honest, those promises sound doable. We have opportunities such as the Gulf Coast Flood bedding drive or Coins for Kids or our response to the upcoming KKK rally or God's Work, Our Hands next Sunday that help us to care for others and the world God made and to work for justice and peace. During the week, many of you really do proclaim Christ through word and deed, by the way you live and sometimes even by inviting others to church. Those promises sound doable.

But today Jesus asks us what's the cost of that first promise I mentioned: learning to trust God. "Give up all your possessions. Hate your mother, wife, children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself."

"Carry your cross and follow me."

Learning to trust in God means not just paying the cost of giving up the bad, destructive sinful things in our lives, but Jesus calls us to pay the cost of the very best of the gifts he has given us, too. Today, the Holy Spirit might be asking us: Are you doing it? Are you paying the cost?

When that offering plate comes around in 15 minutes, how many of us are going to put in 100% of our income? After the service, how many of us are going to take leave of friends and family and spouse and go to the far parts of the world to spread the Gospel? How many of us are going to pick up our cross and follow Jesus to Jerusalem and Calvary? How many of us are going to pay the cost?

Being a Christian is hard. It comes with a cost.

Pause

Some of you know this much better than I do myself. Some of you no doubt have come from situations where you've been estranged from friends or even family because of your beliefs: because of people who can't accept your Christian faith. Others for a variety of reasons come to church alone on Sunday mornings. Some of you know the cost of offering as a real financial sacrifice.

I think today if I were being washed once again, whether that's in the bathtub back at my parents' or in the waters of baptism, I might be tempted to answer the question differently about being a brave, foolish builder or a wise, cowardly king. I don't know whether I've gotten any wiser on one hand or if I've lost my bravery on the other, you will have to decide for yourself, but I don't think it's so easy. When I sit down to consider the cost today, I think of my parents who sacrificed so much to raise me, who love me. I think of how hard I've had to work through school to get to this point and still paying a large percentage of those loans back to the government. I think of my life that means so much more after having had to endure ups-and-downs and after having had to struggle with issues of body image and self-worth. And I think of my wife Nikki, the best thing that has ever happened to me. What would it mean to pay the cost Jesus names in today's Gospel and give that all away?

Today, I might answer with the wise and cowardly king. If I'm honest, I don't know if I can do all the things that Jesus is asking of me. I might ask Jesus if there's another way: a way to keep all those good things. Maybe weekly church attendance and a 10% tithe. Enough to show I care, but not the total life commitment that Jesus demands of me. If you asked me now as an adult I think I'd be afraid to be washed, afraid to set out as a disciple.

Being a Christian is hard. It comes with a cost.

Not many of us can pay that cost. Wherever we are in our faith walk, whether we've been walking the road for 50 years, whether we're not so long removed from that small child in the water, or whether we're just now considering to set out, the road we walk on when we're

following Jesus leads to Jerusalem. The road ends at the cross. That is the cost that we all must pay.

To pay that cost, Jesus calls us to put our whole lives in: not just the worst stuff we can give up easily, but the best of us: our loved ones, all our possessions that we've saved up, even our lives ourselves. When we come to the end of the walk, when we come to the hour of our death, foolish builders and cowardly kings alike, we will all find that we can't pay what the cross asks of us.

Jesus isn't calling us to be brave and foolish builders or wise and cowardly kings. He is calling us to be his disciples.

To be a disciple of Jesus is to realize that you're always going to come up short of that cost. But it's to learn to trust all the more strongly that Jesus Christ on the cross already paid the cost for all of us.

It's to learn to trust that the best thing in our lives didn't happen during our lifetime, but it happened two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ gave up his family, he gave up his disciples, he gave up his possessions even the clothes he was wearing, and yes, he even gave up his life, and *Jesus paid the cost for all of us.*

His story is so much better than the two stories we can tell. His story is of God who counts the cost: who knows the power of the enemy, who knows the power of sin in the world, who knows our deep scars of evil, who knows the finality of death, and makes peace not with an army of ten thousand, but with just one. Just one man born in a manger who conquers the very worst that the armies of this world can throw at him: from the brutal physicality of the Roman Empire and Herod to the sting of sin and death.

The tower that he builds is not a majestic edifice, but a crude tree at which passers-by will mock and jeer. And a tower that reaches not to the heavens, but down to all of us mired in the depths of sin and even hell.

Being a Christian is hard. It comes with a cost.

And our story is this: that on Good Friday, Jesus paid that cost. He paid that cost so that cowardly kings, foolish builders, babies in the water, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, wives, and husbands, and stumbling disciples could learn to trust in him and even dare to follow him. Following Jesus isn't easy. He will take us through places of the cross. Following Jesus will not just include Easters in our lives, but days of painful decisions and even Good Fridays. But when "it is finished," our story ends with his. And that means resurrection and life paid in full. **Amen.**