

"ON COUNTING THE COST"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 10, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

I've heard it said that Jay Leno of the Tonight Show is a really nice guy and recently I read somewhere that when Jay Leno returned from entertaining the troops in Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War that he brought home with him a list of 200 telephone numbers of parents of troops in the Gulf War. Leno called all 200 parents personally to say that he had seen their sons and that they were doing OK. Leno will even stop on the Freeway to help a stranded motorist. In fact, not too long ago he pulled over for a group of men standing around an old Cadillac. He offered them the use of his car phone so they could call for help. The men took advantage of his offer. They called home...to El Salvador. Leno didn't know this until he got the bill.

Jay Leno, of course, can easily afford a call to El Salvador. Most of us would probably think twice before offering the use of our phone to a complete stranger. Our generosity might cost us dearly as it did our church some time back when someone was using the church phone to call Yugoslavia. But how many of us have been burned sometime in our lives because we didn't stop to ask... to consider the cost before making a commitment?

DEVELOPMENT

I think that Jesus knew that people often make that kind of a mistake. They get caught up in a movement without thinking where their involvement is leading them. And He knew that people sometimes leap before they look and such people are unlikely to stay with the program very long. Their commitment will always remain something of a superficial sort of thing. Here in our text, He decides it is time to begin the process of separating the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats.

In this passage from Luke 14, we see that there is a large crowd following Jesus...following Him, as usual. After all, He was the hottest ticket in town. Many I'm sure were following Him out of curiosity or perhaps because they had nothing better to do. He wasn't interested in that. Jesus wasn't looking for spectators. He didn't want gawkers. He wanted disciples...people who were willing to put their life on the line and so He puts them to the test, saying:

"Whoever comes to Me and does not hate his father and his mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself...cannot be My disciple."

Wow...these are strong words! What's behind it? What does He mean..."hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters...yes...even life itself" And He goes on to say, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple." Strong words, indeed...puzzling...troublesome....

What's He driving at? What's He getting to? This talk about "carrying a cross". I'm sure the crowd was a bit baffled by all of this. Only criminals get to carry crosses. He talks about "love"...and then this word "hate" is spoken and then while the crowd was digesting all of this, He went on to say:

"For which of you intending to build a tower does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he had enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he had laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'"

TALKING HERE ABOUT OUR LIVES

Of course, Jesus here was not talking about building towers at all but talking about building lives. He probably sensed that some of the people who were following along after Him had little idea of what they were getting themselves in to.

I'm sure that some of them were caught up in His works of healing...and for good reason. Others were fascinated with His words...with His stories that touched their lives. Yes, He had a way with words. They enjoyed hearing Him "tweak" the Pharisees from time to time. They did not know what following Him would one day entail. And now these words...."hate your father and your mother"... are disturbing, but Jesus must have known that there would come a time when people would be disowned by their families because they followed Him. People would lose their property because they chose to follow Him. Many would even lose their lives because they signed up to follow Him. To follow Jesus was no small decision. This was no Sunday afternoon picnic...no harmless, but satisfying hobby. It would be costly and Jesus here in this passage was wanting His listeners to "think through" the possible consequences before they put their name on the line, on the card and made a commitment to follow Him.

It reminds me of an inscription that appears on the west wall of Winchester Cathedral in England. Perhaps you've seen it....it reads like this:

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"This way, those who are willing to pay
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those who are merely here for the show".

Jesus, you see, wanted the multitude to think through carefully the commitment they were making and I think He would say the same thing to His followers today.

FOLLOWING CHRIST IS A CALL TO COMMITMENT

For you see, following Christ is a call to commitment. And this brings us to the second point that needs to be lifted up and what better time to do this than on a Sunday when we're approaching a new season...when we need to get refocussed and renew our commitments to the Church.

When you were baptized at the altar of the church...or when you were con-

firmed "in" the faith, you were not simply joining a social club or just another organization. Not if you took your vows seriously. To be a baptized member of Christ's body is to be really "tied in". Yes, it is to stake your life and everything you have or will have on His call to service. It is a call to commitment, a call to make a decision....a fundamental decision about life, your life....about who Christ is and what He means in your life.

Let me use a contemporary analogy. We've been watching a lot of tennis these last two weeks and it peaks this afternoon, I believe. It's true in life as in tennis that you "win" by serving. I've long been a Chris Evert fan. Back in 1978 when she was in her early twenties, she was maid of honor for a wedding I was performing and I had opportunity to chat with her and I suppose because of those moments I've always read everything about her with much interest.

When Chris Evert was in High School, she deeply wanted to be a cheer leader. No surprise there. Lots of girls want to be cheerleaders. But Chris Evert also wanted to be an outstanding tennis player. She had to make a choice. And it was not easy for her for like most girls that age she wanted the acceptance of her friends at school. Cheerleading was a good way to gain it. She went to two tryouts and thought she was pretty good. She tells us that her dad gave her some good advice.

"Chris....you can either be a great player, or you can be a cheerleader and go to all the parties and turn out to be an average player."

Chris Evert could have been a cheerleader, but she couldn't have done that and gone on to win five US Opens and two Wimbledons and a lot of other matches. As Fred Hartley says in his book, Growing Pains, that choice that Chris Evert made while yet a teenager was probably "the single greatest choice ever made for the advancement of women's sports".

"When she was 14, she laid aside most of the thrills, and the frills of common teenage life".

In fact, Chris Evert only attended one prom and one slumber party through her High School days. But she had a higher goal and she committed herself to it.

You and I have lived long enough to know that life is filled with choices like that. There are choices that are not to be made impulsively, but only after much prayer and much searching of the soul. For every time you choose one alternative, you cut yourself off from others. In fact, this word "decision" comes from the Latin roots "de" which means "from" and "caedere" which means "to cut". Chris Evert cut herself off from cheerleading to excel in tennis.

Most important decisions are like that. When we marry we decide for one person and cut ourselves off from others. When we accept a job, or an assignment, we cut ourselves off from other opportunities we might have had. Jesus wanted those who were following around after Him to realize that if they accepted His call to discipleship they might very well be cutting themselves off from family and friends, from material comfort, perhaps even from life itself. It was not a time for an impulsive reply. Who was it who said, "When you come to the fork in the road, take it?" For the serious Christian, that's impossible.

INACTION IS THE BIGGEST BARRIER

However, Jesus knew that impulsiveness was not the biggest barrier that most people have to face. He knew that the biggest barrier is inaction. For every one who leaps without looking there are a dozen more who never "leap" at all. They're the ones who stay on the sidelines...lingering there....and become God's frozen people.

Jim Burns tells of watching an interview on the evening news with a homeowner named Paul Swanson. There had been some terrible mud-slides in Swanson's community...a cul-de-sac with fine houses. Swanson's house was the only one that remained intact and the reason for this was intriguing. About two years before, the homeowners on Swanson's block hired an engineer to consult with them and to advise them if they should consider building stronger foundations around their lovely homes. The geological engineer advised them to strengthen their foundations, but did say that realistically the odds were against a landslide in that area. Swanson was the only one in the community who spent the \$20,000 to strengthen the foundation of his home. The others heard the advice...but decided to take their chances. The very next year the devastating mud slides came.

Some of his friends might have called Paul Swanson impulsive for spending so much money when the engineer said that such slides were quite unlikely. And if the slides had never come, he might have felt like his \$ 20,000 investment was wasted. But after serious consideration, he made a decision to act and obviously, he was lucky he did.

Now most people, I feel, do not have as much difficulty with impulsiveness as they do with inaction. The first step is always the hardest to take. It's that initial decision that is most daunting. Our hearts are warm, but our feet are cold.

A DECISION TO FOLLOW CHRIST

And this brings us to the important conclusion that we can draw from this teaching of Jesus.

Sometime or another, we must make a decision about following Christ. We must decide whether we shall be spectators or gladiators in His arena...observers of the passing scene or movers and shakers for His Kingdom....standing on the sidelines or sitting in the grandstands with your head going from right to left and left to right. Jesus would tell us you're either in the game or you are not!

A rather sobering story is told by Franz Kafka in his novel, The Trial. A man has been instructed to enter a kingdom through a certain gate. He finds his way to the gate, but then notices a sentinel guarding the entrance. So he sits down and waits for the sentinel to give him instructions, or to grant permission to enter. The guard does nothing and says nothing. And so this man continues to sit...waiting for something to happen. For a whole lifetime he sits...and sits. Finally the guard closes the door and turns to the man. He says:

"This door was made for you and for you alone. And because you chose not to enter it, it is being closed forever."

Franz Kafka wrote many deep and profound things and I would not even begin to pretend that I know what he meant by this little story...but it could be a parable of the Kingdom of God.

CLOSING

Christ has set before us an OPEN DOOR. He has given us the opportunity to pursue the Kingdom life or to spend our lives at "spiritual couch potatoes". The handle to that open door that leads to life is on the inside; only we can make that choice, only we can open that door.

You and I have a continuing decision to make. Lucy O'Brien, a pioneer newspaper woman in Florida puts it this way:

"The most important question a person ever asks is:
'If I die today, what will my life have stood for?'"

I ask you to put that question to yourself, even as I put it to myself. I don't want your answer to be an impulsive one. You need to count the cost. Remember that to say "yes" to one thing is to say "no" to many other things. But the greatest danger is not that of impulsiveness, but rather of inaction. Only twelve men and a small but unknown number of women out of the thousands who ever heard Jesus teach said "yes" to His call of discipleship. The rest apparently felt the cost was too high. Maybe they were just too comfortable with the way things were.

Where do you see yourself in this scene...in all of this. There is a door made for you and for you alone. I pray that you may have the desire and the strength to open that door and to walk through....to have your life stand for something great, something lasting....something that will make a difference.

PRAYER

Shall we be together in prayer:

"To every man there openeth a Way, and
Ways and a Way.

And the High Soul climbs and high way
and the Low Soul gropes
the low,

And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro,

But to every man there openeth
A High Way and a Low,
And every man decideth
The Way his soul shall go."

Move in our hearts, once again, O God....wrestle with us in the dark and shadowy corners of our hearts and bring us out into the light and peace of your presence. Confirm within the decisions and intentions of this hour spent in Your presence. In the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen

PASTORAL PRAYER: September 10, 1995

O GOD - of our beautiful and at times our burdened lives - we thank YOU for the blessings of this week just past... that its many hardships and heartaches may strengthen us to live yet more creatively and closer to YOU in the week that now begins.

GIVE US THE GIFT of a great FAITH...that we may take our defeats and turn them into occasions for the victories YOU would have us celebrate and enjoy.

GIVE US FAITH...that in our loneliness we may know YOUR company... and in our distractions YOUR solitude.

GIVE US FAITH...to leave in YOUR hands the well-being of those we love so dearly...especially those whom we now name in our hearts and lift up before YOU, o God.

Be where people hurt.
Be where people are healing.
Bind the broken hearts.
Help mend the torn bodies,
Ease the restless minds.

O GOD....who while we rest "neither slumbers nor sleeps"...and whose peace passes all of our human understanding, we YOUR children bless YOU, for yet another gorgeous late Summer Day has been granted to us...one whose grandeur and beauty we hope not to miss.

AGAIN, WE PRAY to YOU for help and support -

NOT that we might do greater things, but that we might do better things.
NOT that we might be spared life's pain, but that we might become wise.
NOT that we might have all things to enjoy life, but that we might be grateful that YOU have given us life to enjoy all things.

SO....teach us, Lord, that gladness is always at hand.
that contentment lies always in discerning the value of things we have.

AND in the presence of our daily work, when there seems too little space for quiet, help us to remember YOUR SON, Jesus...who knew neither impatience of spirit, nor confusion of work, but in the midst of all HIS labors kept a tranquil heart, a loving spirit, and a steady perspective on all things. In His name we pray.

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