

## Counting the Cost

Sunday, September 5, 2010: Luke 14:25-35

The Rev. Peter Faass, Rector

Has anyone ever tried to help you clear up a conundrum or major decision that you are facing in your life by saying hey, go and “do the math?” In other words take an inventory of all the facts, both the positive and the negative, then add them all up and see what you get? Doing the math means assessing whether or not you have the resources to successfully accomplish the task before you. If you do then by all means proceed forward. And if you don’t . . . well, better either to wait until you do or come to the realization you never will, that it is just not meant to be. Nothing will get you into hot water faster than embarking upon a mission, new responsibility or relationship than not having the resources to engage it successfully.

Each of us is called to count the cost of everything we do and to only enter into new commitments deliberately so that we may do them well.

I have been doing a lot of pre-marital counseling lately. We have had four couples at Christ Church in various stages of preparing for marriage this summer and fall. One of the requirements in the Episcopal Church for couples seeking the sacrament of marriage is to meet with a priest for a minimum of three counseling sessions. These sessions are meant to help a couple engage in deep conversations about the reality of what it will mean to be married.

The Book of Common Prayer states that, “marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately.” (BCP page 423). In other words, a couple is to count the cost of their potential new relationship – they are to do the math.

Now marriage – when it is approached reverently - is a beautiful institution, but like all relationships it does have its rough spots and challenges. Pre-marital counseling focuses a couple on issues that can cause rough spots or conflict in a marriage; issues like communications, money, intimacy, family, children, and hopes and aspirations for the future. Ultimately the pre-marital counseling is intended to provide the couple with insights and tools so to do the math of marriage; the math of what it takes to live in relationship with another person.

Understanding that “marriage is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly” by the time the couple is standing in front of the priest on their wedding day, they will ideally have counted the cost of this new relationship – they will have done the math reverently and deliberately. Having done this faithfully they have better prospects for a successful marriage.

In today’s Gospel Jesus tells those who desire to follow him to do the math first before making that huge commitment. “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.” Jesus then gives two illustrations about doing the math, counting the cost of doing so. The first is about engaging in a building project without estimating the cost of it first, (any one who has ever done a home remodeling project can identify with this story!) and the second is about a King who is planning to wage war and needs to count how many soldiers, tanks and artillery he has before engaging in battle.

In Bible study this past Wednesday, we struggled with the harshness of the language in this passage, especially Jesus’ call to hate those we hold most dear. These are dissonant words for us. Hate is completely antithetical to Jesus’ message of love. The Bible studiers found The Message interpretation more palatable than the New Revised Standard version. It reads, ““Anyone who comes to me but *refuses to let go* of father, mother” etc.

Since Wednesday’s discussion I have rethought my preference for The Message. The reality is we need to face difficult scripture head on and see how it informs our life, no matter how challenging or disagreeable it may be. So how can we understand this call to hate if we are to be disciples of Jesus?

First of all, we are not to understand this phrase in the light of cold, analytical literalness. Rather we are to see it though the lens of Eastern languages, which work to make expressions as vivid as possible to get a message across. Think opera here! When Jesus

says that we must hate our nearest and dearest, he means that no love in life can compare with the love we must have for him; to do less than that is to be unfaithful.

Secondly, Jesus knows human nature and the tendency to rationalize away our commitment to our faith.

We western mainline Christians have certainly gotten much too wishy-washy in our commitment to Jesus Christ. Very few of us really do the math of what it takes to be a faithful follower of Jesus and to sustain and grow his body; which is the Church. Or conversely all too often we actually do the math of what it will cost to enter into that relationship with Jesus and we balk. So we make excuses and equivocate. When we do the math of our faith commitment we are like those notorious butchers who have their thumb on the scale as they weigh our hamburger meat. We tip the scales in our favor. We cheat God. And in so doing we deliberately fail to reckon the full cost of discipleship because we think that it will require too much of us, especially if it means requiring our having to hate something that we really think we love. And I don't mean family or friends.

That's not only engaging in bad math and poor accounting, it's being less than fully faithful, if not downright unfaithful. Because of this pervasive less than faithful approach to our relationship with Jesus the mainline Churches are in crisis; all of them.

Think about it. How many people in mainline Christianity make commitments of their time, talent and treasure without first doing the math of what that really will entail – or at least what it should entail? How many others do the math and find the cost too high because they love other things in life way too much to fully commit to their faith, the way Jesus calls them too?

Four hundred African Anglican Bishops just concluded the All Africa Bishops Conference in Uganda this past week. One of the most vociferous differences between our Anglican brethren in Africa and we in the American Episcopal Church is over the issue human sexuality. I agree to respectfully disagree with them on this issue. But the greater context in which this difference occurs is that Christians in Africa perceive that we Western Christians have lost our passion and our commitment to the scripture in general and to Jesus Christ in particular. On this count I believe they have a valid point - because we have.

Cultural accommodation of the Christian faith has progressed steadily in the past half century. And I am not talking about the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the Church. Rather I am talking about how the culture has eroded the commitment of Christians to their faith and how the faith has responded by accommodating that erosion. For example I have come to believe that Sunday morning soccer practice and games for our young people is the work of the anti-Christ. It is a cultural accommodation that ends up being an obstacle to their full commitment to Jesus and his Church. When we fall victim to this kind of cultural accommodation that pulls families away from Christian formation and worship, it ends up being nothing more than appeasement of forces hostile to our faith. And appeasement to the secular culture is a no win endeavor for the Church.

Western mainline Christians have become so used to this accommodation pattern that we fail to see the tension between the teachings of Jesus and the fulfillment of our own self-centered wants and aspirations. But the tension is there and it results in an ever-widening chasm between the individual and their relationship with Jesus. All of this contributes to the on-going deterioration of the Church, of which this parish is not exempt. And that is a mathematical formula for disaster.

If this Christian faith of ours is to ever going to make any sense in our lives, if our lives are ever going to be truly transformed, which only a total commitment to Jesus will bring, then we need a complete change: all of us. Our pursuits, our priorities and our values need to be turned inside out and upside down. Nothing short of that will work or is acceptable.

And the time is running out to do that. Just look at the percentage of churches in this diocese alone that are either on diocesan life-support, can't afford full-time clergy, have slashed all their outreach, mission and education budget, have deteriorating buildings or are living off of their endowment principle. In the majority of these parishes these situations occur because people are just not doing the math right when it comes to their faith life, their full commitment to Jesus.

My sisters and brothers, the cost of discipleship gets paid in many different ways. For some it is a redirection of time and energy. For some others it is a change in personal relationships, a new vocation in the Church or a more serious commitment of

financial resources. The bottom line is that for every person who professes the name of Jesus as savior, the math of being his disciple is all consuming.

If this is not the case for you it's time to re-do the math of your discipleship. Like marriage, our Christian faith is, "not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately." Jesus calls us into relationship with him that is not to be one iota short of that.

Amen.