

Costly Transformation

Will you pray with me?

Holy God – this is not an insignificant thing which You call us to. Discipleship, the way of self-sacrifice, requires a new way of seeing and being in the world. Help us to truly consider the cost – and to trust that there is grace to be found, even when, especially when, we fall short. In your many names, we pray. Amen.

Well, I have to say – the Gospel according to Luke hasn't been giving us much of a break since I arrived here at Bethel.

Directions to stop inviting only our friends and family to dinner last week, multiple reminders that compassion and healing are ALWAYS more important than abiding by the rules, a call to relinquish all of our possessions, all of the things AND people we love...

All with the intention to make space to prioritize God in our lives.

In many ways – the text we heard this morning feels like a culmination of many of Jesus's sermons and teachings leading up to this point.

The verse after our text today ends with Jesus crying out, "Have you been listening? REALLY listening???"

Because if you had been listening, you'd know this: If you are not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it goodbye, you can't be my disciple."

Wow.

Where's the friendly Jesus? The gentle teacher, the nice guy you want to have over for a glass of wine?

Pretty much nowhere in the Gospel of Luke... or the other gospels by the way.

Following Jesus means walking a path of radical transformation. It's not for the faint of heart.

Because it's going to cost us everything.

I don't know about you guys, but that's actually not the best of news to my ears.

I've gotten pretty used to having my cake and eating it too, as one commentator put it. Saying I'm a Christian – a follower of Jesus – while actually often changing very little about my day to day existence.

I'm pretty attached to my family, my friends, my car and the pretty stuff in my house.

All of those people, all of that stuff, makes my life really wonderful in many ways.

I don't want to give it up.

But if I listen to this passage – TRULY LISTEN – I'm going to have to be prepared to give it ALL up if I want to follow Jesus.

After this rather alarming message, Jesus goes onto to give us some helpful examples.

For instance, obviously no builder would start a house project without going over the plans and making sure that the cost won't be more than you have to spend.

And Jesus's second example of the king weighing the cost before going into battle? That sounds wise, right? Can 10,000 troops really go up against 20,000 troops? Doesn't it make more sense, isn't it WISER, to send an emissary to the other king and work out a truce?

Figure out the total cost before you start building, so you can actually finish your project.

Weigh the potential risks of a battle, before engaging. Consider the cost of human life – consider your chances of success. After all, there are other options – like peace...

Seems so obvious.

But here's the thing I noticed as I considered those examples.

In our world, today, we rarely actually weigh the cost of things.

How often do we start building projects only to realize that actually the bathroom we wanted is way over budget? How often do we recklessly rise to a fight without weighing the cost – which is literally human life, often innocent human life?

For a country so distracted by wealth, we're not actually very good at considering the cost of things.

We find ourselves in a moment, in a culture, where it is the norm to rarely weigh the actual cost of things.

Instead, we just barge on ahead – sure that it'll work out, or sure we'll be able to buy things on credit until the rest of the money comes in.

But you can't buy a life of discipleship on credit.

We certainly try.

I'm committed to my spiritual practices until they become a drain on my daily life.

I'm committed to justice until it means giving up my own comfort.

I'm committed to loving my neighbor until they make me mad.

I'm committed to loving God until loving God gets in the way of loving my mother and father, my brothers, my friends.

I'm all about discipleship on credit.

Just a few more years of comfort and stuff and the people I love, Jesus... I promise I'll give it all up eventually, when the bill comes due. I swear – on my credit card!

Following Jesus is not a halfway, buying things on credit, sort of discipleship.

It requires an all-in, money down today, sort of deal.

And if I'm honest - I'm still sort of waffling. I don't want to be, but when I weigh consider the actual cost of transformation, I'm not sure I'm up for the task.

But there is something that makes me want to keep trying.

And it has to do with our final reading for today. This comes from a book called "The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible." I think the title kind of says it all.

There is a yearning within me – perhaps within some of you too – for the more beautiful world that my heart knows is possible.

It's a world where our story is simply a story of Interbeing.

As Eisenstein puts it, "it is a story of reunion – of interdependency, not only for the sake of surviving but also even to exist."

Where our wellbeing is tied up in our community's wellbeing, in the wellbeing of creation. Where I'm only as healthy and whole as my neighbor – and vice versa.

I believe that what Jesus is calling us to throughout his ministry is a state of interdependency – not only with our particular family, but with all of creation.

I know – let go of father, mother, spouse, children???

That sounds nothing like a call to interdependency. That sounds like an everyone for themselves, save your individual soul, to hell (literally) with the rest of the world, kind of discipleship.

But Jesus – the wise guy that he is – knows that often times what gets in the way of our true interbeing is our prioritization of those people and those things we love most.

When our priority is placed on our own families, our own stuff, our own self – we cannot truly enter the Story of Interbeing.

Our own self-interest, our own comfort will always get in the way.

And there, we come right back to the really difficult challenge of this text.

Following Jesus is going to require everything. We'll have to stop prioritizing our life – because God calls us to prioritize ALL life.

At this point in the Gospel of Luke, large crowds have started following Jesus – hoping – perhaps as we hope – that by simply walking alongside this man, we'll be considered one of his followers.

Jesus sets those crowds, and us, straight.

Following Him will require everything.

Because it's an invitation to another way of life.

And I believe it's an invitation to the more beautiful world my heart knows is possible.

A world of connection, of interdependence, of healing, of justice, and of hope.

It's an invitation to a world – not where suffering no longer exists – but where suffering is not endured alone.

It's an invitation to a world where we care for every person as though they were our own father and mother – our own child.

A world where all of creation thrives – because each tree, each animal, is treated as an expression of the divine, not simply as a resource to be used.

I believe that's what we're being invited to.

But it's not going to be easy. And some days, I'm not sure I'm up for the cost that this transformation will require.

And on those days, this piece from James Finley is helpful to come back to.

"We pray not to recharge our batteries for the business of getting back to the concerns of daily life, but rather to be transformed by God so that the myths and fictions of our life might fall like broken shackles from our wrists."

The belief that we're all separate beings, unaffected by one another, moving through the world in little pods of family groups is a myth.

We all depend on one another.

Our healing can bring about the healing of the world. Our willingness to be transformed, to leave behind our self-serving fictions, is the first step towards discipleship.

"The more we act from Separation, the more we helplessly create more of that, too."

Jesus is not calling us towards separation – Jesus is not calling us to personal, individual salvation.

Jesus is telling us that the cost of discipleship, the cost of reunion, the cost of a more beautiful world – is a willingness to let go of everything we know and love too much.

And by letting go, our eyes might be opened to a more beautiful world – one that looks a whole lot more like the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps, here at Beth'el, we can support one another in weighing the costs and choosing to follow – because God is calling.

Let it be so! Amen.