

## Jesus' Cost Benefit Analysis

Although we are not anywhere near the season of Lent according to the church calendar, in the narrative of Jesus' life according to Luke's gospel we are nearing the crux of Jesus' mission to the world—the reason for which Jesus came to dwell among us as Emmanuel. And while we never seem to forget the grace that it represents—we often lose sight of the cost of that grace. The very symbol that we use points to our focus on Easter Morning not Good Friday. After all, Easter Morning is where we find the good news. Although some people have voiced the idea that Christianity is under attack here, in the sense of true persecution that is just not factual. There is religious intolerance, prejudice and hatred but the majority is not being expressed toward those of the Christian faith. There are a lot of people expressing intolerance, prejudice, hatred and exhibiting violence toward many others over many issues which mark those people as different from what a particular group has determined to be “acceptable” based on their standards, but the violence which has erupted has not been because of their Christianity. That violence and hatred toward “others” seems to be the current climate of our broken world—this world that Jesus came to redeem. In Luke's narrative as Jesus came nearer to Jerusalem and the final portion of his earthly mission, his instructions to those he had called and those to whom he sought to entrust the future of his mission, those instructions became more pointed. Throughout he has told them parables about giving up material and earthly possessions to seek other priorities, to be sure that all receive care, not to hoard selfishly. However, the expectations he states in this text seem rather extreme. “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.” Surely, this is an example of hyperbole, although if Jesus is the example, he rejected his earthly family and gave up his earthly life. Surely, we are not literally to hate those with whom we have the tenderest and closest ties? This especially seems strange as we are called to love one another. Addressing the crowd, Jesus continues, “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.” These statements makes giving up possessions he urged earlier sound rather minor. But perhaps the root of the matter is not possessions per se or about loving our families or enjoying life, so much as about checking our loyalties and putting Jesus first—really honestly, tangibly first and before all else when we make decisions, when we say or do things. Remember the context of these statements. Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem. There are now large crowds going with him, not just the twelve, when he turns and says these things to them. These are folks who are enamored by his power to heal, intrigued by his ability to speak with authority. Word is getting around about him and the deeds of power that he is doing. The powerful want to get close to him. Those suffering want to touch him. Everyone wants something from him. Jesus, being Jesus, does not relish the attention or the adoration. He deflects it and redirects it to the mission for which he has come—to carry the cross. He makes it clear that his path is not one of worldly glory, but it is the way of sacrificial love and costly service. And that is the proposition which Jesus is making to those who are traveling with him—he is telling them to consider what following him means through by telling them to analyze the future prospects of the path that he will be taking through the example he gives. “For 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 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.’” That sounds very much like a cost-benefit analysis done by any business project manager before venturing to invest capital. What does this mean in terms of discipleship to Jesus? When thinking about this passage, my thoughts immediately go to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his book “The Cost of Discipleship”. The entire book focuses on the call to discipleship and the response which in scripture is not faith, but obedience. Jesus calls, and those whom he calls answer by following. Our focus is more often on faith, on whether or not we believe Jesus is who scripture tells us he is. But discipleship is based on obedience, to following the teachings. Although much of this book by Bonhoeffer is based on the text from Matthew, specifically the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer clearly states that even there, discipleship to Jesus can tolerate no conditions which might come between Jesus and our obedience to him. In many ways this leads us to the potter’s house text from Jeremiah—to our being reformed and reshaped—because the costly way of self sacrifice and service is not likely to rate high when done according to a worldly cost benefit analysis. Christianity in our context is certainly becoming more counter-cultural than when I was younger. No longer is church attendance the norm or expected. There are no mid-week or week-end hours cordoned off as totally sacred. In fact, there are many when asked about religious preferences declare that they have none. In many quarters, Christianity is perceived negatively or neutrally at best, even by those not of another faith. Yet those of us who proclaim that we are Christian are not persecuted for our faith or punished for our religious affiliation. It is easy for us to proclaim our allegiance to Christ without counting the cost. We do not really have to live in ways that mark us as different from the prevailing consumerism, capitalism and reigning spiritualism of our age. In our proclamation of discipleship, what is it about our lives that distinguishes us—what have we done to fulfill these things that Jesus has listed as requirements for those who wish to be his disciples? This call to be a disciple according to Jesus is a call to change the way we relate to others. Or it should. Our discipleship shuffles and changes our real, lived priorities. Or it should. That call is for us to be different from the world around us in that we look to the interest of others. Or it should. That call to discipleship requires us to give up something in order that someone else will benefit. That call to discipleship is a call to reshape our relationships, loyalties, ties and priorities so as to reflect God’s love for the world and every creature in it. Or it should. That call to discipleship is a call that makes us stop and question, it makes us willing to do the work, pay the price, take the time, and make the sacrifices needed to radically re-order our values and visibly re-shape our actions to place concern for others a priority—their needs important. Or it should. There is much to be done to build up this world in order for everyone to have abundant life—and that was Jesus’ mission to the world—that the world might have life and have it abundantly. Because we are not really any different from the crowd that was traveling with Jesus along that road toward Jerusalem—we too are seeking something from him. The good news is that the grace he offers is free; but the discipleship to him comes at a cost—obedience to the ways that he taught—the giving up of self-interest in loving concern for others—but there is true joy found in the abundant life that is found. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.