

“Put Our Backs Into It”

Joshua 24:14-15; Luke 14:25-33

June 28, 2020

Way back many years ago when I was in high school, I had this buddy, Colby who drove a 1976 arctic blue Chevy station wagon. It was a great vehicle to load up lots of people in and just drive around. And, for the most part, things went really well on our journeys in Colby's station wagon. But, one time, on the way up to a campsite outside of Hickory, the normally reliable Arctic blue station wagon broke down. There we were on the side of the road somewhere on 321.

Now, this was in the days before cell phones so, we were kind of stuck. But, thankfully, where the car died wasn't but a half-mile or so from a roadside gas station/convenience store. There were like 6 of us so we decided to push the car on the shoulder down the road to that gas station.

The skies were threatening that day and, wouldn't you know it, just as we resolved to push the car, the rain started pouring.

I tell you what, pushing a 1976 Arctic Blue station wagon in the pouring rain, man, that's hard work. After pushing for what seemed like an eternity, I realized we were only about 25 yards from where we began. It was then I did something I regret to this day. For the rest of the effort, I kind of half-heartedly pushed. Colby called out from behind the wheel, "get your backs into it!" Which, I assuredly wasn't doing.

Long story short, we got that car pushed into the gas station that day, thanks primarily to my friends. I was there, but I hadn't really done as much as I could've.

A lot of those guys, well, they're still my friends to this day. Whenever I get together with one them, someone will always want to reminisce about that day. That day we scrappy friends triumphed over misfortune.

And, well, I was there. But, inside, I'm a little embarrassed because, well, I know, I didn't really get my back into it that day.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks frankly to His disciples. What he calls for is, I believe, the Spiritual equivalent of getting our backs into this work of Christian discipleship. I read to you now from the Gospel of Luke Chapter 14, verses 25-33. Hear now the Word of our Lord.

"Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

I've been so starved for sports during the quarantine that I've found myself flipping through the channels stopping on a channel to watch a poker tournament for a few minutes. For the most part, I've gotta tell you, professional poker is about as dull as watching paint dry. Just when the prospect of flipping to another channel starts making a whole lot of sense, several players get really good hands at the same time. Each wants to maximize their winnings so they keep on upping the ante. The stakes climb higher and higher. Then, one player physically shoves all of his remaining chips into the center of the pot and says "all in."

Now from what I can glean, "all in" means something like this. I'm willing to wager every nickel I've got that my cards are better than yours. If I win, great! However, if I'm lose, I'm done. Out of the game. But regardless of the outcome, I'm going risk everything I've got into the pot.

Today we're going to talk about "all-in" Christianity because it seems to me that's what Jesus is telling the gathered crowds about.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus has got a host of followers around him. Now keep in mind, it makes a lot of sense that there would be so many people following this man around Judah. He's done some pretty cool stuff by this point in Luke's Gospel. Perhaps most importantly for gathering a crowd, he's healed and fed a great many people!

Can you imagine if a politician today promised you a free meal and the end to your back pain? You'd likely follow that candidate around the entire state of North Carolina just looking for food and healing. So it isn't any wonder why the crowds continue to gather around Jesus here.

Now look, if Jesus was a politician, his career would've ended that very day. You see, its oftentimes the case that politicians running for office tell us what we want to hear, even if it isn't remotely true. Here, Jesus tells us what we don't want so much to hear, even though it is absolutely true. So if Jesus were a politician, chances are He most certainly wouldn't say what comes next....

Jesus turned to that crowd and says to them, "*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.*"

And if that weren't enough to end a political campaign right there, you've got to realize, that's just the beginning. At the end of today's reading, Jesus ups the ante even further. He says "*None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.*"

And you know, as I thought about this passage throughout the week, what I hear in Jesus' words in this passage is a question. Jesus asks us, just like he asks the crowds gathered there that day, "are you all-in?"

You see, in the course of 9 verses, Jesus targets the two things which, for many people, are what mark us as decidedly American. Family and Possessions. Jesus puts both on the table in a high stakes game of Christian discipleship.

Now before we get too freaked out by this, it's important to keep in mind what Jesus is really saying. Nowhere in the canon does God teach us that despising your family is a prerequisite to salvation. Nor is it likely Jesus meant for us not to own clothes or a place to lay our heads at night.

You see, Jesus is using hyperbole here as he tells us to "hate our families or give everything away." Now all hyperbole means really is exaggeration. When you want to make a point, what you do is blow things way out of proportion in order to add emphasis to your words.

Once, when I got back from a mission trip in West Virginia, I exclaimed to my wife "I could sleep for a week." Now I wasn't really planning of slumbering for seven whole days, I just wanted to convey a sense of my tiredness.

Jesus is going to use hyperbole a lot in order to get his point across in the Gospels just as he does here with the large crowds. He'll say things like "*If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.*" He doesn't really mean hurt yourself, rather Jesus is using an exaggeration to highlight the seriousness of sin just like he tells in today's reading about the gravity of putting family and possessions ahead of following Him.

But before we get too comfortable believing that Jesus use of hyperbole completely negates what he says, *keep in mind the larger point he's trying to make.*

Jesus is telling us that to follow Him requires a huge commitment, there isn't room for half-hearted yeses. If we're going to do this deal, we've got to get our backs into it, so to speak.

Are we willing to make do with less stuff than our neighbors because instead of giving money to Starbucks or Ford Motor Credit we'll be giving sacrificially to the church?

Are we willing to have less time to watch sports, fish, hike, stitch, play videogames or go to amusement parks in order to do Christ's work?

Are we ready to really get our backs into it?

Are we "all in?"

It's a difficult query for Christians in America who've grown comfortable with a message of cheap grace. Jesus Christ calls us to him saying essentially "I am the most important thing in your life, whether you realize it or not." I'll bring you the answers to your deepest questions. I'll ease that restlessness you thought

would be with you your entire life. I'll take you away from the worries and anxieties which absorb you and center you squarely at home with me in love. *But you need to know that following me comes with a cost.*

It's interesting to note how often these words are muted, even within the church of Jesus Christ. We see churches grow and grow with pastors who essentially tell people "what they want to hear" as opposed to what Jesus and the Bible actually says. Joyce Meyers once said that if you told people that being a Christian meant struggling and suffering that there just wouldn't be any Christians. In her opinion, nobody wanted to hear that.

To many churches and pastors, the idea that Christianity isn't necessarily a pathway to promotions and confidence but comes instead with suffering and struggling is anathema. For many denominations, the idea that Christians are held to moral and ethical standards which quite often deviate from present society, is no longer part of the program, so to speak.

Make no mistake about it – "Following Christ isn't always comfortable, popular, or prosperous. If that is how our life becomes, then it's quite possible that we are completely ignoring the Gospel. Christianity is the way of self-denial and constant trials. If our path is easy and comfortable, we may be citing Jesus as Lord but not following his path."

Jesus says "*whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*" And the Cross Jesus speaks about isn't your mother-in-law or your mean boss. *Cross carrying means that you shoulder the burdens of the full demands of Christian discipleship which include less material possessions, giving more of our lives and our livelihoods to him and working to glorify Him though evangelizing in His name.*

I'm reminded here of a story that makes the rounds from time to time. It goes something like this..." The story tells of a chicken and a pig peering through the dining room window at a family having a breakfast of ham and eggs. "Doesn't it make you feel good to know that you can make a contribution to the happiness and well being of a family like that?" the chicken asked. Making a wry face, the pig replied, "For you it is a contribution, but for me it is total commitment."

You know, I haven't been around churches as long as the vast majority of you, I realize that. But it seems to me that whichever church you go to, there are essentially two types of members. They're the chickens - The people who hover around the edges and then they're the pigs, the people who're true blue, so to speak. I like that term over calling them pigs. The true bluers are generally at church or out working for Christ in the world. They give sacrificially of their time and their material blessings.

Look, it's apparent here above the hyperbole in this passage – Jesus doesn't ask for chicken-level commitment to Him. He wants you to delve deeply into discipleship in his name and make a total commitment.

Jesus asks us, "are you all in?"

"Is your back into it?"

As many of you know, I worked at Myers Park Presbyterian church before I came here. It was just about everything you'd expect. Big and well-funded with lots going on all the time. At the eleven o'clock worship service, were the Belk family, they sat on the second row, along with scores and scores of prominent Charlotte families.

During Rev. Steve Eason's sermon on this very passage from the Gospel of Luke he got to a point and said something to the effect of "if you're not willing to do the deal, if you're not willing to carry the cross and be a Christian, you ought to renounce your baptism." He let those words linger in the air for nearly a minute before he continued.

I've gotta tell you, it was, without question, the most uncomfortable time for a great many of us there in the sanctuary. And when I think back on it, what I hear is Steve asking the question "are you all in?"

And it's easy to sit here and say YES. *But before you or I or any of us blindly say, sure, let's go. Consider what you're in for.*

Haven't we all at some time in our life leapt before we looked? Haven't we all agreed to do something without really considering what it will entail in its entirety?

I remember this one time doing a catering event at the old Scottish Rite Hall over in Charlotte. Big event. My crew of culinary students did an outstanding job under some pretty difficult circumstances. In order

to reward them, for their efforts, I told them to take off once we'd got done with service. That I'd handle the dishes and finish up.

HUGE MISTAKE. Turns out 100 people create a ton of dishes. I was there for hours when, if my gang had stayed, the job would've taken maybe 20 minutes.

I hadn't really considered what I was doing.

My Mom calls it "biting off more than you can chew." Others may term such a thing "writing checks your account can't afford"

Jesus says essentially "don't do that when it comes to being a disciple. Consider the costs."

And here's the thing, Jesus isn't going to bury the actual costs in fine print like those too-good-to-be-true offers that populate late-night television. Throughout the canonical Gospels Jesus is always illuminating for us the costs of discipleship. Not in fine print, in bold, block, screaming red letters. Going all in means a kind of living on the edge. It means taking risks. It means giving more of ourselves than perhaps we imagined,

And he asks us to consider them before we commit to it all.

Jesus uses an example here in the Gospel of Luke to illuminate his point. *"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 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.'"*

What comes down to not starting what you won't finish. Don't begin something until you've measured the costs. Consider the full picture. What is this going to take from me? What am I willing to spend? Pray over it, consider the fullness of what's being asked.

"Are we all in?"

I know I'm really dating myself here but do y'all remember Evil Knievel? He was a daredevil in the late 1970's. There, on his red, white and blue motorcycle, Evil Knievel would leap over busses and train cars lined up end-to-end. Sometimes he made it...sometimes he didn't. But, like I said, He was a huge sensation for a great many years. He'd pack stadiums full of people just to see him do whatever stunt he'd lined up for him. He got so popular that Wide World of Sports began televising his feats.

I read something about him the other day that I want to share with you. In an interview, Evil told the reporter that he always knew ahead of time if he was going to make the jump. During his test runs, Evil could figure out if the motorcycle was off just a bit or the ramp wasn't quite high enough to clear the obstacle.

Here's the amazing thing!

Evil jumped anyway.

Knowing the cycle wasn't fast enough or the ramp wasn't high enough, Evil attempted the leap nonetheless. Even though he was broken and battered following a near-miss, the crowd always roared with their approval.

One reporter asked him, "Why would you do that? Why would you leap, knowing that you'd fail?"

Evil replied, "the crowd came to see me try it...I was gonna try it. They'd paid good money to see me give my best effort so I did."

Jesus Christ died on the Cross for us. In that one act, Jesus Christ surrendered his life for us and for our salvation. He paid good money, so to speak for us. In response, we're asked to give our lives in service to Him knowing that he'll always provide us what we really need. He'll share with us peace and love and joy every step of the way.

That calls for our best effort.

Jesus calls for us to go "all-in"

I've been blessed in my years in ministry to meet tons of "all in Christians." People's whose lives are so thoroughly dedicated to Christ and His mission as to inspire people.

I've also had the opportunity to read about a number of them through the years as well. One of them is a name you may have heard of – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer was. Lutheran pastor and theologian who got swept up in the events in pre-World War II Germany. As the Nazis rose to power, they began to slowly take charge over religious life in Germany. Soon, the Church of Jesus Christ in German functioned more like a Nazi support group than the body of Christ on Earth.

Bonhoeffer and a number of prominent Christian thinkers deplored this descent into darkness and challenge it vociferously. Writing the Barmen Declaration, these Theologians and pastors declared that, by the Word of God, subsuming the church into the state was heresy, non-Biblical. And then, seeing the writing on the wall. These German Christians fled to safety across the channel in England.

Dietrich left with them. But, feeling the call of the Lord, he returned. He returned knowing that things might get worse. He returned knowing that he would be perceived as a threat to the Nazi state. He returned. Went all in for the Gospel.

He was, after a time, arrested by the Germans, held in captivity and, ultimately executed.

A martyr for the faith.

Years before, he wrote a book. One that's influenced so many through the years. It's called, "The Cost of Discipleship" and is worth a read. In "the Cost of Discipleship," Bonhoeffer comes at what he calls, "cheap grace" while upholding a vision of all-in Christianity. I want to close this morning, reading you an extended quote from the work:

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

We may end up exhausted. We may end up broken and battered.

But you know what?

In the end, we'll be healed. We will be restored. But maybe best of all, along the way, the crowd of angels in heaven will be roaring their approval!

And here's what sometimes keeps me motivated and perhaps it will you as well. I think back on that time, years ago, when I sandbagged. I looked like I had my back into pushing that 1976 Artic Blue Chevy Station wagon, but I didn't. I don't want to find myself in eternity knowing that I didn't put my back into it. That I didn't go ALL in for Jesus.

Would you?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Scripture and Quotes

Intro

Luke 14:25-33 – “Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty

“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.”

“None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.”

“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away.”

Unknown Quote – “Following Christ isn’t always comfortable, popular, or prosperous. If that is how our life becomes, then it’s quite possible that we are completely ignoring the Gospel. Christianity is the way of self-denial and constant trials. If our path is easy and comfortable, we may be citing Jesus as Lord but not following his path.”

Jesus says “whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”

Consider the Cost

“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 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.'”

Bonhoeffer

“Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God.”