

Doing the Math

Luke 9:51-62

Two young friends met on the playground on Ash Wednesday. One boy had gone with his family to a noon Ash Wednesday service and bore the smudge of ashes on his forehead. The other boy looked at the ashes and said, "What's that?"

"It's Ash Wednesday," came the answer.

"What's Ash Wednesday?" asks the friend.

"It's the day when Christians begin their diet."

"What are you giving up for Lent?" is a popular question this time of year, and, as I recently wrote in the Presbygram, the answer to that question often reveals the shallowness of our understanding of the season, or the shallowness of our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

The scripture passage we just read puts this in a clearer perspective. Last week we were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration where we saw Jesus speaking with Moses and Elijah about his coming departure. Remember, the Greek manuscripts use the word "exodus" for "departure." Jesus' coming death is an exodus that leads those who follow him into a new Promised Land.

Just a few verses later, after Jesus comes down from the mountain, Luke says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." That phrase does not simply mean that Jesus turned in the direction of and set out for Jerusalem. "Set his face" comes from Isaiah 50:7. It says, "I have *set my face like flint*, and I know that I shall not be put to shame." Jesus sets his face like flint toward Jerusalem, toward his death, toward the suffering that will save God's people.

Not long afterward, Luke tells of three encounters Jesus has with people who are interested in signing up as followers. Loosely translated, they'd like to volunteer a few hours a week to the cause, but Jesus is not interested in volunteers, he's looking for apprentices. He is not interested in a few hours a week, and he says so in harsh words.

"I will follow you wherever you go," says the first volunteer. This reminds me of Peter. "Even if everyone else deserts you," declares Peter, "I will not desert you." A few hours later Peter is saying, "I swear I do not even know the man." Or another time, James and John come to Jesus asking to sit at Jesus' left and right in his kingdom, and Jesus answers, "You don't know what you are asking."

"I will follow you wherever you go," promises the first volunteer, but does he know what he is saying? Are his words as sincere as Peter's?

"Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head," answers Jesus. Those who interpret Jesus literally as saying, "I am homeless, and so you should be" miss the point entirely. Think about what Jesus is saying. As the oldest son in the family, Jesus owns the majority share of the family's home. But he has left his home and depends solely on the hospitality of others. Go deeper, though, because Jesus has left more than the house he shared with his mother, brothers and sisters. Jesus has also given up his home in heaven. He has let go of two households, both earthly and heavenly, in order to wander the countryside, depending on the hospitality of others, and proclaiming the news that the Kingdom has come near.

"I have given up more than you know for you. What are you giving up?" he asks.

Jesus encounters another man and says, "Follow me." The man replies, "Yes, I will follow you. I just have a very important family obligation to attend to." And he did. According to Jewish law, the responsibility of giving one's parents a decent burial was one of the most important things a child was supposed to do. Jesus' response is shocking in its harshness: "Let the dead bury the dead. You go proclaim the kingdom of God." Those who interpret this response literally miss the point, as well. Jesus is not saying anything about responsibility toward our parents, but he is saying, "I have left my family to follow God. In fact, when my family stands in the way of doing God's work, they are no longer called my family. If it comes to a choice between your family or me, what are you willing to sacrifice?"

The final volunteer. "I will follow you, Jesus, just let me say good-bye to Mom and Dad. I'll be right back." This encounter recalls an event in the history of Israel that everyone watching would have remembered, but most of us don't. It is recorded in 1 Kings 19:19. When the prophet Elijah first recruits his successor, Elisha, Elisha is plowing a field. Elijah approaches and calls Elisha to follow him. Elisha asks if he can say good-bye to his parents, and Elijah allows him to do so. But, when this man asks Jesus' permission to do the same thing, Jesus says, "No. What I require of you is even greater than what Elijah required of Elisha."

This text is one of several in the gospels we have come to know as “cost of discipleship” texts, and they are all difficult to read, listen to, and understand. They include such hard sayings as,

“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” – Matthew 10:35-36

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” – Matthew 16:24-25

“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” – Luke 14:28-30, 33

The point of all these teachings is the same: before we call ourselves disciples, of Jesus, we need to think about what Jesus demands of us, we need to count the cost, do the math. Jesus is not looking for volunteers to give an hour or two a week. He is not looking for part-timers to split their time between Jesus and anything else. He is looking for disciples willing to give up their lives as he has done for them.

What is it that might be standing between you and Jesus? What stands in the way of your putting Jesus as number one in your life? Before we quickly answer that nothing is more important to us than Jesus, stop and think about it.

Parents, are you as concerned that your children grow up knowing the truths of the Bible as you are that they grow up getting good grades so they can get into a good college and get a good career? Are you as concerned that they know the bible as well as they know soccer or baseball? If it comes to a choice between homework or sports or church, which comes first? Are you willing to say to Jesus, “Yes, I will follow you, I just have to take my kid to basketball practice first,” and listen to the answer Jesus gives?

Young people, is following Jesus as important to you as your social life or school? Are you willing to say to Jesus, “Yes, Jesus, I want to follow you, I mean, I really want to get to heaven and everything, but, all the parties are on Saturday night and I’m just too tired to come to church on Sunday morning to worship you.” Are you willing to say that and listen to the answer Jesus gives?

Adults, are you willing to say to Jesus, “Yes, Jesus, we will follow you, but we have this mountain house we love to go to on the weekends, or life is so hectic all week, Sunday morning is the only chance we get to sleep in and relax, so we just don’t really have time to worship you, but we will send a check,” and listen to Jesus’ response?

As Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem to give his life for you and me, he calls on us to do the math and see if what we are willing to give up to follow him matches what we are willing for him to give up on our behalf. Are we willing to live like Jesus? The word disciple does not just mean follower, it means “apprentice.” Those who followed Jesus around did so in order to learn how to live like he lived. Jesus is saying to these three men, and to you and me, don’t follow me around to watch me; follow me in order to learn to live like me, and that means most of all to be willing to take up your cross and walk with me to Jerusalem.

If you do the math, you will find that the cost of following Jesus is extremely high. Jesus demands first place in your life. *First place*, in front of family, in front of career, in front whether you start on the basketball team, in front of getting that big promotion or enjoying that wonderful beach house or golf course, or Sunday morning breakfast in bed. First place.

The cost is high to follow Jesus – your entire life. In fact, there is only one thing that costs more than the cost of following Jesus, and that is *not* following Jesus.

As the martyred missionary, Jim Elliot, once said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to receive what he cannot lose.”

Lent is a good time to get out the calculator and do the math, count the cost of following Jesus and whether you are willing to pay it. Just don’t forget to count the cost of *not* following Jesus.

Amen.