

“Can We Afford Jesus?”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Jeremiah 18:1-11; Luke 14:25-33

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We now move from our Jeremiah reading where we watched God at the potter's wheel, seeking to form of the clay of Israel into a nation of beauty; or more accurately, forming a nation that would reflect God's creative beauty and covenant justice. We move from watching the potter to watching Jesus, back on the road again. On the road again. That phrase from a Willie Nelson song might fit what Jesus might have been feeling after being stuck inside dining halls and synagogues with religious leaders, so set in their ways they could not imagine how God could delight at a banquet to which were invited the poor and the lame, the blind and the outcasts of society; namely, the very ones God favors.

“On the road again; just can't wait to get on the road again.” [written by Willie Nelson; copyright Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC] Perhaps it is not just Jesus who is singing, but the large crowd Luke tells us is following him. Perhaps they are thinking they will be “Goin' places that I've never been. Seein' things I may never see again. And I can't wait to get on the road again.”

Those who follow Jesus are from all walks of life. As such, Jesus tells parables with everyday examples to help people understand. From the parables Jesus will tell in our lesson, it seems there are people who make business deals and those who work for those who make business deals; there may very well be soldiers, who cannot officially say they follow Jesus, as well as young devotees who can't stop talking about him. All of them, excited, to be on the road again, with Jesus.

Perhaps it is this enthusiasm Jesus notices as our lesson begins, for we will hear he turns to speak. I imagine a teacher in the midst of writing on a blackboard or white board or smart board, suddenly stopping, and turning to face class. The students take notice.

When Luke tells us Jesus turns, he is alerting us Jesus is about to say something important, instructive, to this variety of people following him, and enjoying being in his presence. What we are to hear from Jesus is the price tag, the cost of following him – what one must carry and take on, and what one must discard, give up, leave behind.

Jesus and a large crowd are on the road again. Jesus turns, and challenges them to honestly determine if they know the cost of following him. In essence, he is asking, “Can you afford to be my disciple?” The price tag likely surprised the crowd, as it may us as well.

Luke 14:25-33:

*Now large crowds were travelling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them,<sup>26</sup> ‘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.<sup>27</sup> Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.*

*<sup>28</sup>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? <sup>29</sup>Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, <sup>30</sup>saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.”*

*<sup>31</sup>Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? <sup>32</sup>If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. <sup>33</sup>So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions,*

All? Now I don't know about you, but this "give up ALL your possessions" seems a bit radical. I recently had my annual visit with my doctor, talking about good health practices to take on and bad ones to give up, and he suggested not trying to do everything at once because you set yourself up to fail. All your possessions? Come on, now, Jesus. Let's be practical.

Or perhaps Jesus is being practical. Perhaps this large crowd was too large and he needed to weed out some. Businesses often receive so many applications for jobs they find some initial ways to trim the pool to a manageable number. So, too, I expect with a church's Pastor Nominating Committee, which might say, "Forget the call of the Holy Spirit, we need to pare down the number." So perhaps the committee decides, "If you want to be the next pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury, you need to commit to tithe." If that does not winnow the field enough, indicate the tithe must be based on pre-tax income! I expect more than a few would ask themselves, "Can I afford to serve as pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Sudbury?!"

The truth is, Jesus is not winnowing. He knows what is ahead in his journey to Jerusalem and what it will demand of those who follow him all the way. Jesus is being honest, making it clear to the crowd that for which they are signing up if they want to be his disciple.

As is often said, Jesus talked about money, economics, and even food and wine, more than he did the topics near the top of many so-called Christian agendas. So, it should not be surprising to hear him ask people to give up all their possessions. It is the first part of our lesson that is more disturbing with its harsh language. "If you want to follow me, you must hate family and your own life. If you want to follow me, you must take up the cross. Now, can you afford to follow me?"

It is wise to note the family part of Jesus' words can be and has been manipulated by cults, under a guise of religious truth. Preying upon the disenfranchised and disenfranchised, or those who have experienced fractured family lives, cults seek to create an illusion of a new family. Jesus' words about hating family have even been used in an "even Jesus said" way, to lead people to a devotion to cult leaders, who for their part recognize and feed those who hunger for acceptance, belonging and care. Such a cult strategy is practiced by groups like ISIS, using the Koran rather than the Bible, to shape minds and create devotion, and thus also misinterpreting and perverting the Islamic faith's sacred texts.

Yet, Jesus is not addressing those who have been swept up into a cult because they already hate their families. He is speaking to those who are deeply imbedded in a culture that reveres family. As such, his voice carries from those in the first century crowd to us in the twenty-first. So, we wonder, what could he possibly mean that to follow him one must hate one's family? Families form us, sometimes well, sometimes a bit skewed, but for the most part we survive. Jesus' words seem antithetical to our own culture, and perhaps that is why he told two parables about counting the cost.

The first is of a business person, or property owner, determining the cost of a tower before beginning construction, to be sure there is enough money to complete it; otherwise, the label of “fool” will be given. It makes sense. You determine if you can afford the tower before you build the tower. It is not just about money, but time. I find myself taking on too many projects, so some are begun but then linger; sometimes, because I miscalculate how long it will take to complete, and other times, because the initial enthusiasm wanes. I sometimes quip how a full time interim pastor position sure cuts down on the time one has to renovate a house.

The second parable Jesus reminds us of instances in Luke’s Gospel when soldiers, centurions, are present, sometimes seeking a healing, and other times in faith encounters. We might expect there were soldiers among the crowd, even if on official duty. Though they might not be able to acknowledge their commitment to Jesus, they would have understood his parable about a king counting the cost of going to war. They likely knew of commanders who sent troops to war without having a plan, an exit strategy, or having even determined the cost in money, lives, morale. They knew it was the soldiers on the ground and front lines who paid the price. For me, this parable remains eerily relevant today.

Know the price of following me, Jesus is saying. Determine whether you can afford to be my disciple by calculating both what you must take on – the cross – and what you must give up – your possessions.

I did think about this demand about possessions and how we might do a bit of a dance around it, how we might be able to give up our possessions, but have them too. We might say, “You know, all I have actually belongs to God. I am just the steward, the caretaker. Nothing I have is really my possession.” Such words are often cited each fall during the church’s annual stewardship emphasis. Yet, in reality such language puts us in the role of being God’s power of attorney, doing God a favor by writing checks and purchasing things in God’s name, for ourselves. I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind. I mean if you can’t fool the IRS with such a dance around possessions, how could we think we can fool God?

Yet, how do we consider the call to give up all our possessions, or as Joel Green translates the verse in his biblical commentary “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not bid farewell to all you have.” [Green, Joel, Luke, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1997), p. 563] I think of packing for a trip where there is a bag or weight limit, and there might be some things you would love to take along but cannot, so one bids them farewell for a time. Yet, there is a finality in Jesus’ bidding farewell that goes beyond leaving it behind for a time.

What I would like to do is have us imagine Jesus guiding us from on the road again journey into Jeremiah’s potter’s house. There, I could hear Jesus say, “If you want to be my disciple, you need to allow me to put you – your whole self – on the potter’s wheel, to form you to reflect the beauty of your creator.”

Most of us have seen a potter at work. I once had a weeklong study leave at Princeton Seminary with a potter during which we studied at biblical images of being formed. Each of us also had took a turn at the potter’s wheel, working with the clay. In spite of essentially playing with dirt, there is a mystical symmetry to forming a pot on a wheel. There is a tactile interplay as the clay responds to the pressures of the potter’s hands, and the hands to the clay. If done right, from a formless lump, a vessel arises.

Now imagine if added to the clay were small lumps of hardened clay, or jagged rocks, or even shards of glass. One cannot imagine being able to touch the spinning clay with those things imbedded, but rather than give up, you begin to remove them, particularly the sharpest ones that will bring harm.

That is how I think of the call to give up our possessions, those things that are a part of us, but which restrict how God can shape us into people of beauty. And as my doctor suggested, we might need to do so one possession, one cultural norm, one habit or addiction at a time, recognizing possessions are not just what we own, but anything to which we cling and refuse to give up.

Emilie Townes, of Vanderbilt Divinity School, puts it this way: “In the process of becoming living disciples, we must, as Jesus states, also learn to give up all of our possessions – our need to acquire, our yearning for success, our petty jealousies, our denigrating stereotypes of others, our prejudices and hatreds, and more – and follow the way of Jesus as we place ourselves on an ever-treading potter’s wheel to examine our thoughts, words, and actions.” [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 46]

The “ever-treading” of God’s potter’s wheel. That, for me, is our hope. God willing to stay with imperfect clay, just as a teacher is willing to stay after school for students, or the friend who really means it that you can call at any hour of the night. God does not give up on reforming us, did not give up on the clay of Israel, as long as there is a willingness to place our whole selves on the spinning wheel for reformation. We are also to recognize and remove those sharp pieces and the hardened stones and crusts of dirt that will resist or even scar the potter’s hand.

Jesus’ words are addressed more individually to the crowd, but our Jeremiah text is about the community, and for us, the church. We know buildings are not the only possessions of the church. Past traditions can also be as hard or sharp impediments as buildings. We might be wise to ask, “At what point does the shape of our past no longer fit the potter’s ability to rework us as clay for the future?” I find this question echoed in the line of a song by John McCutcheon, “There’s no future in how it used to be.” [2002 John McCutcheon/Appalsongs (ASCAP) & Steve Seskin/ Larga Vista Music/ Scarlet Rain Music]

It would seem almost impossible to be molded into something new if our buildings and traditions are resistant, non-compliant, hardened clay in the potter’s hand. I have to surmise God at the potter’s wheel is not interested in spending time reshaping the church just for the maintenance of buildings or the survival of traditions.

To put ourselves as pliable clay on the potter’s wheel has a price. It will cost us things we cherish, possessions that shape us, relationships that define us, traditions we worship. Yet, as individuals and the church, we put it all that on the potter’s wheel, with faith and trust, so we can be formed into the shape of, and reflect our identity as God’s creation. That’s priceless...but, by Christ’s grace, it is affordable.