

“The Asking Price of Discipleship”

In 1937, German theologian and anti-Nazi activist, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote a book entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. Published posthumously in 1949, it argued that the Christian church had grown apathetic in the light of Christ’s calling, resulting in what he called “cheap grace,” and that the Church needed to reclaim the “costly grace” of true discipleship: *“The only man who has the right to say that he is justified by grace alone is the man who left all to follow Christ. Such a man knows that the call to discipleship is a gift of grace, and that the call is inseparable from grace.”* This book, especially this concept of cheap grace vs. costly grace, would have a profound impact on many theologians and pastors over the next seven decades — myself included.

Last Sunday, I argued that the Gospel lesson — the calling of Matthew, the curing of a bleeding woman, and the raising of a dead little girl — raised the question of significance. I tried to articulate that Jesus is always drawing alongside us to help us understand our worth in Him. That contact with Jesus inevitably leads to a calling for us to live as His people, His disciples.

Today, the Gospel reading takes us a step further in exploring what is the asking price of discipleship. I use the term “asking price” rather than cost; cost implies an already-agreed-upon or settled amount. “Asking price” points out that one party has set this as the amount desired, but the other party hasn’t yet said that this is the amount they are willing to pay. When it comes to discipleship, we need to know the asking price.

According to Matthew, Jesus laid out some of the terms for discipleship, and if we look beyond the details to the principles involved, we’ll get a better grasp:

First: Discipleship will take us to the places of greatest resistance: **“Go**

nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'”

Second: Discipleship involves taking on hard tasks: *“Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.”*

Third: Discipleship demands absolute reliance on Jesus: *“Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff ...”*

Fourth: Discipleship is not about outcomes: *“Whatever town or village you enter, find out who in it is worthy, and stay there until you leave. As you enter the house, greet it. If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.”*

That’s the asking price. How can we afford it (that’s the question with any asking price)? Here the other two lessons for today offer insights.

At the foot of Mt. Sinai Israel finds itself in a new situation, but it is not necessarily a delightful situation (new seldom is). No longer slaves, they face the prospect of living free — but they’ve been slaves for over 400 years; they don’t know how. Oh sure, in this text we hear them proclaim their covenant relationship with God: *“We will do everything he has said.”* (sounds like the Confirmation vows we heard last week). They meant it ... but soon came the grouching and the complaining, and the longing for the “fleshpots of Egypt.”

Why? They hadn’t envisioned what being free would cost — the harshness of the wilderness, the hunger, the walking. Slavery was awful, but they had developed coping mechanisms; this was not working so well. Here’s God’s message to them: *“Every one of you has seen what I did to the people of Egypt. You saw how I carried you out of Egypt, as if on eagle’s wings. And I brought you here to me. So now if you obey me and keep my agreement, you will be my*

own possession, chosen from all nations. Even though the whole earth is mine, you will be my kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

Ask yourself: “What have I seen of God’s actions on my behalf?” “How has He carried me, rescued me, brought me to himself (I suggest you start looking at the baptismal font)?” “Have you heard His message that you are His own possession, His chosen?”

For many of us, the longing for the old remains . . . why? Some of it involves our brokenness (the traumas of life). Let me ask: “Have any of you failed to get everything you needed in life? Have any of you gotten something in life you really didn’t need? Have there been times in your life of great pain (emotional/physical)? Have you ever experienced a close friend’s betrayal? Does it seem sometimes like life is just one pile of manure after another?”

If you said yes to any of that, you’ve had some trauma in your life; it has left you broken and distorted. When Jesus draws near, he comes to heal.

Life is not just about the past, however. Today, right now, someone in this room feels: The grief of a loss ... the impact of stress (or more importantly distress) ... anger and unforgiveness (which leads to bitterness) ... guilt and shame ... anxiety. That is no prophetic utterance on my part — it’s an awareness that we all walk in some darkness. We have heard God’s calling, but the brokenness and the darkness still has hold over us (Luther: *simul justus et peccator* at the same time sinner and saint).

We begin to think: “We’ll never be any different.” We can’t seem to get it right. We know that we are called to something more . . . better . . . but it’s always over there . . . just beyond . . . just around some corner that we cannot see.

So we begin to invent ways to “fix it.” We work a little harder. We try to please others a little more. We self-medicate [drugs, alcohol, food, cleaning, shopping, sports — whatever is your medication of choice].

We try to hide it away (if I don't look at it, it will go away). But the brokenness and the darkness do not go away. The guilt and shame seem to cling like a second skin. Who can even begin to think that this broken wreck could ever meet the asking price of discipleship?

How can we find healing, and power, and resource to follow? ***“Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot all followed . . .”*** how'd they do it?

They went out (or did they? Matthew never tells us about their going; Luke does, Mark does, but it may well be that Matthew held off because for him it was more important that we understand the conditions of discipleship than that we hear yet another success story that tells us we cannot measure up). St. Paul tells us that how we measure up (performance) has nothing to do with the asking price of discipleship: ***“God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”*** Were any of those Twelve “still sinners” as Jesus speaks into them these words of calling? [Let's see: Peter/denier...Thomas/doubter...Matthew/tax collector...Judas/betrayer]. Yet in spite of — maybe because of — their sins, God uses them powerfully to His purpose

Because here is the true asking price of discipleship: “Can you let go of you for God to use you?” It's not your worthiness or unworthiness. It's not your sinlessness or sinfulness. It's not your piety or skepticism. It's not your status or lowliness. It's not your intelligence or foolishness . . . that matter. It's your *availability*.

Are you available to be used by God?

The rest of the asking price — floggings, rejections, not knowing what to say, betrayals — that you can learn how to endure . . . and overcome . . . IF you are available.

Learning to live with God as your only resource, your only hope, your only protection — you can discover how to do that . . . IF you are available.

Reacting under pressure, what to do when the opposition comes, responding to attacks from the Evil One — you can learn all kinds of techniques to fight those battles . . .IF you are available.

How to love, how to forgive, how to witness, how to accept others, how to get past your hang-ups, how to stop the wheels from coming off — these are all teachable tools and skills . . .IF (what)?

Jesus told the Twelve: ***“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the LORD of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”***

I wonder who might be available?

Amen.