

Cost estimates

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2016.

So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

Luke 14:33

In this year of national elections in which candidates hold contrasting views, whether traditional, conservative, reactionary, liberal or progressive, Jesus comes across as radical. His teachings get right at the root of the matter. Going against tradition and custom, he offers a whole new way of life that challenges those who are comfortable with the status quo.

The first requirement of this new life in Christ is the place of family ties. Jesus is not really telling us that we should hate our family. What he is saying is that our love for God must come before our love for anyone else, including our own family members. Family ties and loyalties are important, but our love for God takes precedence over any other loyalty. When our love for God is our first priority, our love for family and friends is even stronger.

The second requirement is based on the metaphor of bearing our own cross and making sacrifices. We have to be willing to count the cost to be part of the new life in Christ. Jesus uses two examples for this requirement. The first example is that if you plan to build a tower, you have to make sure that you have enough material to complete the job. Construction on the Washington Monument in Washington, D.C. began in 1848. By 1854, construction was halted due to lack of funding. The costly and bloody Civil War prevented any further construction until the American centennial in 1876 when authorization was given to complete the project. It took 36,000 blocks of marble and granite rising 555 feet high to complete the project in 1884, making it the world's tallest obelisk. You can tell where the construction was halted and resumed due to the change of the color of the granite that came from a different quarry.

His other example of counting the cost is that military leaders should know the strength of the number of their combatants and weaponry before going into battle. If the enemy outnumbers them in both, they should seek a treaty to avoid complete annihilation. History records the mistake of entering into costly and unfunded wars without a winning strategy or exit plan.

The third and final requirement of the new life in Christ is to be willing to give up material possessions. This means renouncing anything that stands in the way of our commitment to follow Christ. There is nothing wrong in itself in having nice things, as long as we don't give undue importance to them. We have to ask ourselves what we would do if everything we have were stolen or lost in a fire or natural disaster. Those whose homes have been destroyed by war, hurricanes, floods and tornadoes have had to gain a perspective about the place of their property and possessions. They were glad to be alive and were all the more determined to start over again.

If we become too attached to our possessions, it is a good indication that they own us and not the other way around. Giving up our attachment to what we own requires a radical shift in emphasis. While most of us would find it unthinkable to sell everything we have, Jesus is teaching us that the cost of discipleship requires not just a portion of our selves but all we have. This means keeping our relationships and material possessions in the right perspective. While human instinct cries out for self-preservation, our highest calling is for self-sacrifice.

After hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, members of our parish went there to work on repairing and restoring the homes that had been damaged. In some areas, the destruction was so great that entire neighborhoods were virtually wiped out. All that remained were cement slabs on which homes had been built. The residents lost everything they had and they had to start all over again. One resident sitting outside his FEMA trailer told us that despite losing everything, he loved living there and intended to stay. Such is the love of home over the forces of nature.

Life in Christ requires that we make major decisions about our sense of values. It means knowing that all we have belongs to God. Each of us must decide. No one else can decide for us. When the possibilities of losing everything we have becomes a source of anxiety and undue attachment to possessions, it is a good indication that they own us. The acceptance of

the call to discipleship means putting things in perspective by surrendering all our possessions and relationships to God.

This Labor Day weekend is a good opportunity to recommit to a right perspective about our work. If you see unethical or illegal practices in your workplace, you have to decide if you are going to speak up or go along in order to get along. A good conscience should not allow us to be part of compromising our principles of honesty and decency for personal or corporate gain. Our own spiritual health and wellbeing is far more important than anything else. All our loyalties are secondary to our commitment to live our life in Christ.

If we are able to see what we do for a living as a vocation in God's service, we are committing to the highest standards in our vocation as Christians. Looking out for each other and encouraging each other raises the standards and gives everyone a sense of value and self worth.

This is all part of the challenge of being modern day saints. The only question is: are we ready?