

“Count the Cost!”
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – September 4, 2022

Please Read:
Jeremiah 18:1-11
Luke 14:25-33

This last Sunday, after 42 years of service, Rick Warren preached his last sermon at Saddleback Church in Orange County. He and the ministry there is probably most famous for his *40 Days of Purpose* book and various curriculum churches have used to motivate people over the years. I met Rick a number of years ago when he was in Paris. Although I am suspicious of any Mega-Church leader these days, he seems to be a man of integrity and authenticity. One of the keys to his leadership was a simple motto, “Begin with the end in mind, that means being purpose driven.”

That’s what Jesus is teaching us this morning, and appropriate as we prepare to begin a new season of ministry and mission here at FPCNC. You need to always begin with the end in mind. Remember the end, the goal, and that realizing any goal involves commitment, and every commitment requires a cost. Jesus’ goal is the Kingdom of God, the vision of a world where God’s values of justice, love and kindness are the norm.

Kim and I were watching Serena’s last three matches in the US Open at Arthur Ashe Stadium. She was glorious even in her defeat, but I thought about the four decades of her daily practice to be the Greatest Of All Time, especially as a woman of color in a traditionally white sport. Through injuries and I’m sure many slights and setbacks over the years, she paid the price. She said, “Luck has nothing to do with it, because I have spent many, many hours, countless hours, on the court working for my one moment in time, not knowing when it would come.”

Which is a good reminder also that you have only one life to live, and you better take the time right now to consider how you are living it. Don’t kid yourself into thinking that somehow God has singled you out for immortality. We don’t have all the time or money in the world, so we have to also learn to prioritize, to choose judiciously how we will invest what we have to accomplish what is most important for us. The question is toward what end will you be investing your life?

That’s really what Jesus wants you to consider today. It’s a great text for us to consider on this Labor Day weekend, when so many of us have made the Faustian bargain that if we just work hard enough, we’ll “make it.” I love the reminder that many of us have climbed the ladder to success, only to realize that we’ve had the ladder up

against the wrong wall. It's never too late to reflect and make changes, to consider what or for whom are you giving your life? And what is it really going to cost in the end?

What's interesting to me is when Jesus decides to give one of the toughest texts in the whole gospel according to Luke. Jesus was getting really popular with the crowds. Multitudes showed up to hear him teach and watch him do miracles. Who can argue with the numbers? Jesus was a success! So, you might think Jesus would say something like, 'We must really be doing something good. Look at the crowds!' That's what *we* might say. But Jesus is different. He launches an assault against those things that we hold most dear - parents, family, possessions. I groaned (again) when I saw this text for today. It's a continuation of the whole "I have not come to bring peace, but division and fire" speech of a few weeks ago!

But Jesus is speaking the truth here, again. *If* you want to follow Jesus, it's going to cost you! You count the cost if you really want it. No king would go to war without first sitting down and contemplating if he has enough troops and weaponry to win the war. Otherwise, he would be advised to go and ask for a negotiated peace.

Likewise, a contractor would look like a fool to begin a building project without first contemplating how many bricks he is going to need to finish the project. Otherwise, he will get half-way done, run out of building materials, and look ridiculous in front of his neighbors. Count the cost.

In some ways, this is common sense. It's a lesson we all must learn in life. Everything has a cost. There is no free lunch. So, count the cost.

Yet, this may be a particularly difficult word for the church to hear. In many ways we want to become more accessible to people new to the faith. We want to make it all more understandable, comprehensible, more fun, make it feel so loving and warm. One of the most important things we've been talking about recently is hospitality for youth and children. And don't we love to sing about God's "Amazing Grace?" Can't we come to God "Just as I Am?" And on the one hand this is true, and may be a really good reason to be attracted to Christian faith, to Jesus, to know God's unconditional love and acceptance, a comfort to us in difficult times... Who doesn't want to come and hear such good news?

But in the same Gospel, the great crowds seemed to Jesus to be not a sign of success, but a problem to be addressed. His sermon that day sounds like a corrective, a means to ensure that the crowd will be a great deal smaller at next Sunday's service. To

these great crowds, Jesus tells them that there is a cost, and he warns them, this is going to cost you.

If you're going to follow me, you're going to have to pick up your cross and follow me. You're going to take what you have and share it. Sell it, get rid of excess, share for God's glory. If you are married, be faithful. To be faithful means to pay the cost of fidelity. If you're a parent, Jesus calls you to count the cost of being a father and mother to your children. There's no substitute for time.

You may be offended by this rather staccato litany of to dos. It's really just the tip of the iceberg. Are you praying? When's the last time you got off your Twitter and Instagram account to study the Bible and question the deeper truths of life. "*Let's get serious here*" is what Jesus is saying. "Let's find out who really wants to follow me." It's irritating really. You might hate this teaching. Maybe that's just good practice, because Jesus talks about even hating your most cherished loved ones, *if they come between you and the path to which Jesus calls you*. Being a disciple will cost you!

Which leads me to a perhaps surprising insight regarding this tough gospel for today. I tell you, not only is there a cost to everything that is important in life, and we ought to count the cost, but also this: *Some of you are eager to pay the price!*

I think you are looking for something or someone to whom it is worth giving your life. Maybe that's the reason why you have come here this morning. You are willing, even eager for something true and demanding, something that will cost you. Maybe you've realized in life the best things will not come simply. It will not be three easy steps. It will not be some podcast class. It will not be cheap. The ultimate, what Jesus calls the Kingdom of God, demands something of you. No pain, no gain. Make a turn in life away from your natural tendencies toward something bigger than yourself.

That's what Jesus is talking about here. He is intimidating, but what he says is true. And anything less would be either a lie or low-quality goods. We must not make following Jesus into something trivial, unimportant, or easy. Life is not that way. The cross of Jesus is not that way either. In a world too often filled with hatred, injustice, and violence, many of us are eager to pay the price for a world of love, justice, peace.

Which brings us finally to what this passage means for our church. We are a church committed to impacting our community. I must say I was disappointed to read the headline in the local news of the Board of Education rejecting its own Diversity, Equity and Inclusion goals. As a congregation, as followers of Jesus, I hope we will

give faithful witness to loving inclusively and learning continuously. We are called to live differently!

With Rally Day coming up, it's a time for new beginnings, new commitments. So, yes, invite a friend. We offer some great opportunities for going deeper in life, through study, prayer, fellowship and service... Maybe you've been hanging back, watching, waiting, taking it slow, but let's be clear that our vision, our goal is the Kingdom of God...

And that's where Jesus steps in and says: Count the cost. *If you're going to follow me, then I want you - I want you to know the fullness of my love. But if you're going to be a part of my band of disciples who change the world, who show a radical love for all people, you need to be "all in."*

Jeremiah used a beautiful image of God as a potter. God wants to take us and re-shape us, mold and reform us into a new creation. That means putting ourselves completely in God's hands. Jeremiah warned too that either way, there will be a cost. If we do not yield to God's claims upon our lives – and living into the life for which we were created and to which we are called, there will be a cost to pay. The real issue is what are you buying, really? On what end are you spending your life?

I like what Mike Gerson wrote in the *Washington Post* on Thursday:

"... the way of life set out by Jesus comes like a clear bell that rings above our strife. It defies cynicism, apathy, despair and all ideologies that dream of dominance. It promises that every day, if we choose, can be the first day of a new and noble manner of living. Its most difficult duties can feel much like purpose and joy. And even our halting, half-hearted attempts at faithfulness are counted by God as victories.

God's call to us — while not simplifying our existence — does ennoble it. It is the invitation to a life marked by meaning. And even when, as mortality dictates, we walk the path we had feared to tread, it can be a pilgrimage, in which all is lost, and all is found.

Before such a consummation, Christians seeking social influence should do so not by joining interest groups that fight for their narrow rights — and certainly not those animated by hatred, fear, phobias, vengeance or violence. Rather, they should seek to be ambassadors of a kingdom of hope, mercy, justice and grace. This is a high calling — a test that most of us (myself included) are always finding new ways to fail. But it is

the revolutionary ideal set by Jesus of Nazareth, who still speaks across the sea of years.”¹

As we gather around the table this Labor Day weekend, take a moment to reflect on what vision you’re really working on. Jesus’ vision of a better life and fairer world for all is beautiful to me, but it is costly. So, make no mistake about it. Jesus is crystal clear: We must keep the end in mind, and to realize the vision of the new heaven and earth, full of love, justice and peace, will cost you nothing less... than everything.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.

¹ Referenced on line September 1, 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/09/01/michael-gerson-evangelical-christian-maga-democracy/>