

# "Counting the Cost"

Luke 14:25-33

September 5, 2010

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Something very significant happened last week which almost went unnoticed: the war in Iraq ended. At least it was declared to be over by President Obama who said last Tuesday, "Tonight, I am announcing that the American combat mission in Iraq has ended. Operation Iraqi Freedom is over, and the Iraqi people now have lead responsibility for the security of their country...We have met our responsibility. Now, it is time to turn the page."

Why has the war been declared over? Has the violence stopped in Iraq? After seeing the President's speech, I think the push to end the war and the decision to declare the war over occurred because the cost of continuing the war, both in dollars and in lives, was unacceptable to many Americans. \$900 billion dollars and over 4,400 lives were expended to fight this war. After counting the cost for for fighting such a war, it was determined that the cost paid out compared with the benefits received was not feasible. So, the President decided to halt the war.

But this is a sermon, not a political speech. What does all of this have to do with our life in Christ? The factors which determine whether our country will go off to war are the same factors which determine whether a person will go off after Christ. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus tells the following parable about discipleship,

"What king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So, therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Our following of Christ is likened to going to war. The enemy we face in this war is far more sinister and powerful than Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Hitler, Stalin, or any other king, dictator, or despot that our nation has ever faced. That enemy is Satan, the father of lies, the source of evil, and the inspiration of all evil rulers. As St. Peter writes, "Your enemy the devil prowls around

like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." His ruthless mission is to oppose God by destroying the crown jewel of God's creation: humanity. Unlike terrorists who simply seek to snuff out human life before slinking back into the shadows and darkness from whence they came, Satan seeks not only to kill our bodies, but to destroy our souls in hell.

When considering going out to war against this enemy, some seek to either ignore the Enemy (as if he didn't exist) or face the Enemy on their own. Remember, after 9/11, how confident our nation was about its ability to defeat terrorism, no matter the cost. How well has that played out in the last decade? In facing Satan, the ultimate and most powerful enemy, we have no chance on facing him alone or together. He will triumph and destroy us all. As Martin Luther wrote in his well known hymn, A Mighty Fortress is Our God,

*The old evil foe Now means deadly woe;  
Deep guile and great might are His dread arms in fight;  
On earth is not his equal.  
With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected.*

The good news is that someone mightier than ourselves came to fight for us: Jesus, the Son of God Himself. As St. John writes, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work." (1 John 3:8). He didn't stay safely in heaven and lob missiles upon Satan from a great distance, as several of our recent wars have been fought. Jesus came into the trenches to fight a ground war against Satan. As the author of Hebrews writes, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death --that is, the devil--and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death." (Heb. 2:14-15)

Jesus' final battlefield was upon the cross where He went toe to toe against Satan and all the evil he could muster. Initially, it seemed as if Satan had won. After all, when your enemy dies, you are usually the victor. But Jesus' death on the cross was not defeat for Him and victory for Satan. It was God's judgment against sin, evil, and ultimately Satan himself. Apparent defeat was turned to

overwhelming victory when Jesus rose from the dead to destroy death's power over us and Satan's control of us. As Luther says in his hymn,

*But for us fights the valiant One, Whom God himself elected.  
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, Of sabaoth Lord,  
And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.*

*Though devils all the world should fill, All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill, They shall not overpow'r us.  
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will; He can harm us none,  
He's judged the deed is done; One little word can fell him.*

Jesus has the victory and He calls us to share in that victory by following Him on to victory.

But, in going after Jesus, like in going out to war, there is a cost. It is easy to sing patriotic songs and call for others to go off to war. It is quite another thing to pay the cost for such a war or go and fight the war yourself. In the same way, it is easy to talk about following Jesus and claim to be a follower of Jesus. It is quite another thing to pay the cost of discipleship and actually follow Jesus. In our text, Jesus sets out the cost for following Him and urges each of us to count the cost - considering what is to be gained, as well as what will be lost in following Him - before calling oneself a disciple.

First, the cost for following Jesus is the effect that it will have on relationships with family and all other human beings. Jesus says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." These are harsh words and we would like to ignore them. But, the truth of the matter is: if anyone seeks a way to follow Jesus in which obligations, duties, and loyalties to family outrank one's commitment to following Christ, that person cannot be His follower.

Therefore, we are called to hate anything (including our closest loved ones) if they prevent us from following Jesus. We might cringe at that since "hate" has such a negative connotation in our society. However, in the Jewish society, it had a different connotation. "'Hate' is a Semitic expression that means to turn away from, to detach oneself from something. It does not carry the emotional meaning of animosity that we normally associate with the word...When Jesus speaks of

hating mother and father, spouse and children, brothers and sisters, he is not talking about subjective, emotional animosity toward them, but objective detachment from them. He is not telling us to dislike or abuse our family, but rather to love him more than we love them. When he uses the word "hate," Jesus is talking about priorities, not feelings of anger." (Bremer)

When we were baptized, we were born into a new family -- the family of God -- which is to be our top priority and to whom we owe loyalty first and foremost. Jesus modeled that new relationship Himself. When Jesus' physical family (mother and brothers) came to see him once and someone said they were standing outside, Jesus replied, "My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice." Jesus was not being cruel or uncaring. He was simply stating the truth that, in the Kingdom of God, spiritual kinship outranks physical kinship. If you are not willing to do this, then you cannot be Jesus' disciple.

Secondly, the cost for following Jesus is the effect that it will have on our own lives. Not only are we told to hate our own lives, but Jesus says, "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple." Those who have detached themselves from family and begin to follow Jesus must understand the path they are walking upon. It is the same one that Jesus walked before us -- the way of the cross. The cross symbolizes the rejection, persecution, and death which Jesus endured. If anyone seeks a way of following Jesus which includes offending no one, being loved and accepted by all, and enjoying an easy life, you cannot be His disciple. Faithfully following Jesus will involve rejection by people whom we love, persecution by those who hate us, and dying to this life and all that it entails.

Thirdly, the cost for following Jesus is the effect that it will have on all that we have. Jesus says, "any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." Money and possessions are not evil. Only their use can be. When material things control us, rather than we controlling them, only then does it become sinful because they become our master instead of God. As Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and Money." (Luke 16:13) As long as we grasp on to

material things and hold them tightly as our top priority, we cannot be Jesus' disciples. Faithfully following Jesus means to let go of our grasp on these things and detach ourselves from them.

The cost for following Jesus is more than enduring confirmation class, giving up an hour of our time on Sunday morning, and throwing a few dollars into the collection plate. The cost of going after Jesus, like going out to war, is a high one. It involves the loss of human relationships, material possessions, and even our own lives. Therefore, before going, like before going out to war, we have to consider not only what we lose, but what we will gain. The cost is high, but the gain is higher. We follow Christ, not to win popularity contests, not to gain material blessings, and not to enjoy an easier, more successful life. Those who seek such things will always encounter dead ends. Human relationships break up. Material goods wear out or fade away. Life always ends with death. We follow Christ past human relationships, past possessions, and even past death itself to life in the Kingdom of God which never breaks up, never loses its joy, never wears out or dies. The loss of the things which we hold most dear cannot destroy that which *is* most dear: life eternal in heaven.

Luther concludes *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God* with these words

*And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife,  
Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won;  
The Kingdom ours remaineth."*

The road to the Kingdom is not easy. It is fraught with temptations and diversions. The follower of Jesus loses the world and gains only a cross while in the world. The only thing that gives us strength to follow Jesus and sustains our life as we follow is that which began it: God's gifts in Baptism, His Word, and His Supper. As we follow Jesus, we live lives of repentance in which we daily return to our Baptism to drown our old sinful nature and to rise as new people every day. As we follow Jesus, we receive guidance through the temptations and diversions from His Word which is "a lamp to my feet and a light for my path." (Ps. 119:105). As we follow Jesus, we receive nourishment and refreshment in His body and blood which give us His forgiveness, strengthen our faith, and nourish our soul to enable us to continue following Him.

As our government now turns its full attention to the war in Afghanistan, we pray for those in authority as they consider the cost fighting that war, as well as the benefits of continuing in that war. We pray that the right thing will be done. As people who claim to be followers of Jesus, we pray that He will help us consider the costs of following Him, as well as the benefits of following Him. May He always help us to endure the costs, no matter what they might be, and thus gain the benefits of life in the Kingdom of God here on earth in humility and lowliness and then in heaven in glory and power forever. Amen.