

Sermon on Luke 14:25-33
13th Sunday after Pentecost
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

On Friday, my “day off”, I seal coated our driveway. It’s not my favorite task in the world. In fact, since I bought our first two buckets of sealcoating, I have been avoiding it, watching the weather. But this past weekend seemed to be a last chance before rain and cooler weather made it impossible. So I cleaned the driveway on Thursday evening, and woke up to a day of work on the blacktop. I thought that two buckets of black goop would do it. But it wasn’t enough. They covered just about half of the driveway. So I took a break, and drove to the store to get another 5 gallon bucket of “the best” sealcoating. That lasted until there were only two feet of driveway left. So, I had to go to the store again. Four buckets did the job, with a small amount left over. The cost, then, was twice as much as I had thought. Instead of \$50 of the black stuff, I spent \$100. I had counted the cost, but I came up short. But I had enough in the bank to cover the rest. Then I took a shower, and a long nap, because I was tired!

But not without asking people online “what shall I preach come Sunday?” One of my pastor friends offered a baptismal connection: “You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever!” Not bad, moving from sealing my driveway to a reminder that when we are baptized we have been sealed with the promise of God’s love that is always with us, and marked with the cross Jesus carried and died upon, for us. My hands and feet were marked with tar, I hope not forever! Another quoted Isaiah 58: “you shall be called the repairer of the breach, a restorer of streets to live in.” I like that – pretty literal, though! My friend Jon Campbell, ever the musician, quoted the Song of Solomon: “Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.” (Set to music, of course!) A Roman Catholic layperson friend offered this: “And on the seventh day, God rested.” Good advice!

In the gospel, Jesus spoke about discipleship. He said to the crowds who gathered to hear his preaching, how hard it would be to really follow him and be his disciple. He used some *hyperbole*, saying that “*Whoever doesn’t hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. If you cannot carry the cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.*”

Maybe Jesus was exaggerating to make a point, but the point is, if you want to follow Jesus, and be a disciple, it won’t be easy. You will have hard choices to make, and you can’t just live your life comfortably as you might like, and limit your faith to “thoughts and prayers” when bad things happen, deal only with your

own spirituality and forget about your neighbor. Discipleship doesn't work that way. Yes, grace is free, and the love of God is unconditional, but following Jesus is hard – it's a rocky road. Like my mother used to say about growing old, "It's not for sissies, or the faint of heart. This is hard work!"

So Jesus advised his listeners, which includes you and me, to "count the cost". *"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see if you have enough to complete it?...Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able [to do it]? If he cannot....he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. [Unless you are president today. Now, you offer to buy their country!] So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."* Say what? All of it? Please, Jesus, say you're not serious! I hope THAT is just hyperbole! But is it?

I guess it's time to be honest as Lutherans about the great, big paradox of our faith. Yes, God's mercy and grace are unconditional, God's love is limitless. There is nothing you or I can do to "earn" our salvation, because the gift of life and God's love is free! There is no cost! But this love of God, shown by the gift of God's son Jesus, who gave his life for us on a cross, is priceless, without measure! There is not enough that we can do to follow Jesus, because Jesus asks for "all of our lives". He asks for you to give everything to God, who has given you all that you have. Though grace is free, discipleship is a commitment for life, and so it involves hard choices. Baptism is a gift of God; but you and I must choose to walk, like the paralyzed man healed by Jesus, to get up and follow Jesus.

Now, we are used to making commitments in life, and we make choices every day. Choosing a career, or a college, entails decisions about your future and planning for how you will pay for it – you count the cost! It takes a commitment to another human being to get married; before we do that, we weigh the "pros and cons" of the commitment. If you don't, and just go "by feelings", you are not taking marriage seriously! When you buy a house or apply for a mortgage loan, there are obviously choices that you make, and the bank makes! When you decide to have children, there are lots of preparations to make, involving choices. If you don't count the cost, you are in for a big surprise when the bills pile up. All of these choices involve making serious, life-long commitments as well as making sacrifices. So even though the mythology says that today's generation doesn't make commitments like previous generations have, don't believe it! Education, career, relationships and marriage, home and family all require making hard decisions around life-long commitments. This never changes.

It is the same with faith, although not everyone has organized religion on their list of priorities. Following in the footsteps of Jesus as a Christian, choosing to follow the faith of Moses as a Jew, or the teachings of Mohammed the Prophet

as a Muslim – all of these paths require a commitment if you are to truly live by faith. You can't just read "*Christianity for Dummies*" and hope to understand what faith in Jesus and the God of the Bible really means! There is no condensed *Reader's Digest* version! You have to live the faith, experience the challenges and ups and downs of life and death through the lens of faith, to begin to have an idea of what Christian faith is. It is the same with any faith!

In our first lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses spoke to the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land. Moses reminded them that God had set them free from slavery in Egypt, led them through forty years of suffering and challenges in the wilderness, until this moment. That day Moses set before his people a set of choices: life and prosperity, or death and adversity. To follow the God who had brought them from slavery to freedom, or to follow something or someone else. What they chose had life or death consequences, which would bring blessings or a curse. Therefore Moses urged them: "*Choose life! Love the Lord, obey God and hold fast to your faith, for this will mean life for you!*" The Psalm continues this promise of life: "*Happy are they ...whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on God's teaching day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season.*"

We have choices to make today in the Church, and as individual persons of faith. God has led us here at Redeemer for almost 130 years, since 1890 when a small group of German immigrant Lutherans chose to worship together and teach the faith to their children in English, then chose this location to build a church. This choice brought many high moments of beauty and faith, as well as the lows of financial challenges and eventual decline in numbers. But over the years this congregation has always chosen according to faith: to stay in this community, to welcome refugees and people of other faith traditions, to reach out with love to our neighbors, to welcome human beings of every color, culture, and sexual orientation into this church, and to open our doors to people who struggle with the demons of addiction, or the challenges of poverty or the lack of housing. With the choice of moving out or simply giving up, this church has always chosen LIFE – and to stay.

Now that the ELCA has chosen to be known as a "Sanctuary Church" denomination, we have more choices to make – about how we lead this Church in choosing life for refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers. Will we follow Jesus and welcome children or will we simply follow orders, close our borders and separate families, causing needless suffering for children? We can choose a different path. We have difficult choices to make as a nation about which God, and which law, we follow. But to me the choice is clear: we follow Jesus, who said "let the children come to me" and taught us to love your neighbor as yourself.

My brothers and sisters: choose life – for that is what it means to follow Jesus. But in this case life means also to carry the cross – the challenges that faith

brings to our lives, even as it brings such richness and promise! For carrying the cross means that you and I take seriously the life of faith following Christ. We don't ignore the challenges that sin and evil bring to life, the hard choices between right and wrong, and discerning what that even is in a given situation! For we often have conflicting loyalties – to family, faith, church, community or nation! Sometimes following one means we have to choose against another, and that is hard. Faith in Jesus can ask you and me to give some things up – perhaps certain possessions or comforts in life, which you may think you need, when you seek the richness of placing your trust in God, or count the cost of loving your neighbor. Sometimes you and I make bad choices, or at least unwise choices, which hurt us, our loved ones or our neighbors. But even when we do, God has promised to forgive us. God continues to love you, and Jesus continues to lead us, imperfect as we are! So have no fear, little flock, for God has promised to give you the kingdom! God's peace and hope, LIFE forever, in the name of Jesus! Amen.