

Counting the Costs (Luke 14:25-33)

I have an admission to make: I have a problem—and not in the Frank-Costanza-Festivus-airing-of-grievances sense. My problem isn't with you people. My problem is me.

The nature of my problem causes me great shame. So, it's not easy to talk about ... especially in public ... from the pulpit. I mean, who likes to get up and be vulnerable to a room full of people?

But I've beaten the drum of truth and honesty for so long, talked about how this is one of the rare congregations where it feels safe to be the same person you are in public as you are in private—not to have to worry that if people actually saw the **real** you, they'd judge you.

As I say, that's an amazingly rare gift in this age where people are so busy hiding their truest selves from the invasively

ensorious glances of a world feverishly looking for any opportunity to judge you. So, I want to keep faith with y'all by practicing what I preach.

So, here goes: I have a problem: My mouth gets me in a lot of trouble.

Now, this might seem to you—who probably never have to worry that your mouth has the potential to make your life miserable—like a pathetic admission.

Lucky you.

But me, I've got to stay vigilant, lest I talk my way into situations I can't easily talk myself out of.

Now, you may also be thinking: "***Of course***, you have a problem with your mouth. Did you think we'd never noticed?"

Oh ... well ... yeah, sure. I do let my mouth get me into good old-fashioned trouble because I can't shut up about stuff many people in our culture would just as soon not talk about. But that's not the problem ***I'm*** talking about.

The word that gets me into the biggest messes isn't some rhetorical bomb-throwing I may engage in. The word that so often makes my life miserable is "yes."

Yes. It's such a simple word, but saying it can be like pulling the pin on a grenade: if you don't keep a tight grip, everything will blow up.

Here's how it happens. I'm sitting in my office, and I check my email and see something from somebody I know with a subject line that says something like: "Can you help?" or "Urgent request!" or "I need to ask a favor."

What follows is usually—though not always—something legitimately important. Could you help with rent for a single mother of two toddlers?

Do you think we could use the church building to host our fundraiser, and you would agree to clean up afterwards?

Would you consider chairing the state committee to preserve *Hello Kitty* socks and *Pokémon* arm bands in our schools?

And me, either not wanting to let people down or thinking that it would be really cool to be the state *Hello Kitty* and *Pokémon* chairperson, look at my calendar—certain that five more meetings a month shouldn't be that big a commitment. And I say, "Yes. Sure. I'm your man. Just tell me what you need."

And often, it's only after I wake up in the middle of an unmanageable life of sprawling commitments that I think, "You know, maybe I didn't think this through."

Saying “yes” can get you into trouble you might otherwise have avoided by coming clean that some commitments that look reasonable, important, or vocationally advantageous just ask more of you than you have to give.

Following Jesus down all the dark alleys he frequents, for instance, falls into this category of a life filled with potentially unintended consequences.

Following Jesus, like buying a 1997 Toyota Corolla from Ray’s Used Car Emporium, involves discovering a bunch of costs you hadn’t noticed until they finally ask you to sign on the dotted line.

I mean, look at our Gospel for today. Jesus has been eating with his longtime buddies, the Pharisees, where he’s proceeded to lecture his hosts on compassion, humility, and hospitality at dinner parties. He tells them that when holding dinner parties, they ought not to invite their friends and family, but rather the

poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. "And you will be blessed," Jesus says, "because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

One of the dinner guests, Luke tells us, latches onto Jesus' reference to the end times, and launches into a chorus of *When the Roll Is Called up Yonder*, prompting Jesus to tell the parable of the Great Feast.

You remember that one. A man threw a big bash and instructed his servant to go out and tell the guests that the champagne was chilled and the prime rib was pink. But when told that everything was ready, everyone who'd been invited started making excuses: "Wish I could, but we just closed on our lake house, and I promised to take the kids down to do a little skiing."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Was that today? I just bought a new can of WD40, and I thought I'd grease all the hinges in the house."

“I’d love to come, but tonight’s our seven-week anniversary, and we’ve already made plans for a romantic dinner at Dairy Queen.”

The boss, the thrower of parties, gets annoyed and tells the servant to go down to the local shelter and invite those folks home for dinner. When the people from the shelter finally show up, the hall’s not full, and so the boss tells him to get out a bullhorn and start inviting everybody—except those folks who were too busy to accept the first time. They won’t get so much as a Swedish meatball.

Now ... important turn here. Luke shifts audiences. First, Jesus is talking about banquet guests who ghost the invitation (14:15–24). Then, “large crowds” start trailing Jesus (14:25), and he talks to them—bandwagon disciples. He widens the table for the left-out but sobers the tag-alongs who don’t know what dinner costs. Same grace, different warnings.

So what’s he doing?

In Luke's hands, "hate" is Semitic hyperbole—a way of saying "love less by comparison." Think Jacob loving Rachel more than Leah (Genesis 29) or Jesus' own line, "whoever loves father or mother more than me" (Matthew 10:37). Jesus isn't educating us in contempt; he's re-ranking loyalties. If anything outranks **him**—home, nation, party, alma mater—he's pretty sure you'll bail when the cross shows up.

And then Jesus gives two mini case studies to expose people like me—the "Yes-now-details-later" crowd. A builder sits down and **counts the cost** before pouring a foundation. The ruler of a country does the math before starting a war.

Translation: Don't start a tower with no budget meeting. Don't declare war on Tuesday without a supply chain. Following Jesus isn't impulse buying; it's line-item discernment about what to pick up and what to set down.

And Luke won't let us spiritualize this with inspirational posters. He lands the plane with money: "**So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions**" (v. 33, NRSV). Cost isn't just emotional; it's **material**. Following Jesus pries open fingers that have been white-knuckling our stuff—our accounts, our status, our security blankets—so that **our** goods become **common** goods in God's economy.

But part of the reason Jesus puts out this disclaimer is that too often what people think they want is ease-of-use, friction-free, pre-packaged, no muss—no fuss, no ironing necessary.

But Jesus knows that there are some hardy souls who aren't in the market for easy; they want interesting. The kind of people Jesus is appealing to are looking for meaning, purpose, adventure.

Simon Sinek tells the story of Ernest Shackleton (*Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*). In the early 20th Century, Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen, led the first expedition to the South Pole. The only great expedition of discovery left was the crossing of the continent of Antarctica by the southernmost tip of the earth.

English explorer and sea captain, Ernest Shackleton, made good on the challenge. On December 5th, 1914, Shackleton and a crew of 27 men set out toward Antarctica on a 350 ton ship named, *The Endurance*.

The Endurance never reached Antarctica. A few days out from the southernmost tip of South America, they ran into miles and miles of pack ice. The ship soon became trapped in the ice, as a particularly brutal winter came early.

Ice closed around the ship—"like an almond in a piece of toffee," one of the crew members later remembered.

The ship was stuck in the ice of the frigid Antarctic, stranded for 10 months, as *The Endurance* slowly drifted north. The pressure of the ice finally crushed the ship like an aluminum can.

On November 21, 1915, the crew watched in horror as The Endurance sank in the freezing sea. Stranded, the crew boarded their lifeboats and headed out, landing finally on tiny Elephant Island.

Shortly thereafter, Shackleton left the remaining crew and took off in one of the lifeboats to look for help. They traveled over 800 miles in rough seas before eventually finding help.

What's so remarkable isn't so much the expedition, but that throughout the long ordeal, not one of the crew died. There were no stories of starving men eating one another. There was no mutiny.

This wasn't luck. Shackleton took care to find the right people.

How do we advertise jobs nowadays?

We take out an ad on Zip Recruiter or Indeed. We camp out on LinkedIn. We put forward a list of qualifications for the job and then expect that the best candidate will be the one who meets those requirements.

"Wanted: A Social Worker with a minimum of 5 years experience. Must be proficient in case management. Come work for a fantastic company, with competitive pay and benefits."

It's all about "what" and not about "why."

Shackleton's ad for crew members was different. His ad didn't say what he was looking for. His ad didn't say: "Men needed for expedition. Minimum five years experience. Must know how to hoist a mainsail. Come work for a fantastic captain."

Instead, Shackleton was looking for those with something more.

He was looking for a crew that belonged on such an expedition.

Historians debate whether the famous ad actually ran, but the copy, though it's probably apocryphal, it's still apt. The ad read:

"Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold.

Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in the case of success."

The only people who applied for the job were those who read the ad and thought: "That sounds like my kind of thing." They loved insurmountable odds. The only people who applied for the job were survivors.

The ability to survive assumed that the difficult journey was an adventure. Everybody was on board. So, when things got tough, when the whole thing seemed to be falling apart, they had

assembled a crew who'd already counted the costs and refused to give up.

Following Jesus costs a great deal more than we're able to afford on our own. Let's not kid ourselves, there are crosses with our names on them, just waiting for us.

And to be clear: in Luke, "take up your cross" isn't code for generic misery, like "my bunions are acting up." The cross is the predictable blowback you get for aligning publicly with Jesus and his upside-down reign in a world organized to keep the powerful comfortable. It's the social shame and concrete political and economic risk that come when you side with the people Jesus sides with.

Your cross might be made from the wood of ministering to the homeless. It might be carved from the ancient timber of speaking out against rape culture. It might be from the lonely stand of trees that make up caring for those with physical disabilities or

mental illness. It might be from the lumber of #BlackLivesMatter, or feeding the hungry, or advocating for children held in cages, or caring for God's creation, or demanding an end to gun violence, or welcoming the refugee, or standing up against the injustices that confront LGBTQ people, or providing sanctuary for the immigrant.

And because Luke is Luke, that cross will almost certainly nick your wallet and your calendar. The cost of discipleship shows up as time spent, money reallocated, status risked, and possessions released for the sake of neighbors who can't pay you back.

But don't be mistaken, if you follow Jesus, there's a cross for you.

It's the cost of following Jesus, true. But it's also the cost of fully being the human beings God created us to be.

So, if ***that's*** the kind of adventure you're looking for, if ***that's*** the kind of "yes" you're willing to get in trouble for saying, I know somebody who's taking applications.

-Amen.