

Sept.5, 2010

A Tower for the Kingdom, Luke 14: (15-24) 25-33

I have a friend that I'll call Maddy. Maddy and Bob live out in the middle of nowhere on a ranch. They have horses and other animals, a garden and a pond with turtles. The turtles even have their own beach!

To get to their house you have to get off the freeway onto a highway, then turn off the highway onto a narrower road, then onto another road which is unpaved here and there, then find someone to ask for directions and wind on up the road until you get there. It's a commitment. It isn't easy.

In our passage today Jesus is talking about the cost of making a commitment to follow him. Commitment is not a popular topic these days. Instead of sticking with something, it's more common just to bail out, to quit, to leave when the going gets tough.

If I chicken out when I'm going to see Maddy,

if the road seems a little too rough today or I just don't have the energy to handle all the twists and turns of the road,

I either don't go at all or I call her and ask her to meet me somewhere so that I don't have to drive up that narrow road.

And that's what a lot of people do these days. When the going gets tough, we don't get going, except maybe in the opposite direction. Or we stop halfway to our destination, our goal.

This is true for some people with pursuing their education, working at their job, or staying in their marriage. When it gets harder than they thought it would be, they walk away. The challenge becomes greater than their level of commitment. So they quit.

Sometimes the demands of being a Christian get too hard, too. Sometimes we would rather sleep in on Sunday than go to church. Our rest and our free time is more important than serving others.

Sometimes it's too hard to find the energy to do what Christ has called us to do.

There's an old-fashioned word that used to be used when people backed out of their commitment to being a Christian.

It used to be called back-sliding. We don't use that term any more, but the action still exists. People become Christians and join a church without really understanding that sometimes it gets hard, that it's not all that easy to follow Christ, that you just don't say "Come into my heart, Jesus" and that's all there is to it.

Some people think you don't have to do anything else, that once you've said that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior and you've asked for forgiveness, that you've met your obligation, you're saved, you can do whatever you want to do.

And Jesus, in this passage, is saying that this way of thinking is wrong. That your commitment is only started with that decision, that your journey of following Christ is only beginning.

If you are going to build a tower in the Kingdom of God, if you are going to wage a battle against sin and the powers of this world in your own heart, you had better count the cost because if you don't, you will never make it, you will never win!

This journey with Christ, like the journey to visit my friend Maddy, is a long trip, filled with twists and turns and sometimes the road is very bumpy. Sometimes it costs a lot of our time, our energy, our money, and even our personal relationships.

Christ is telling us that before we can say that we are committed to him, we had better understand that it will cost something. It very well might cost us a lot!

Christ said, "I did not promise you that the way would be easy. I promised you that I would be with you always."

In this morning's passage, Jesus finishes addressing a small group of Pharisees and begins addressing a crowd. A lot of people were following him into Jerusalem, and many of them were following because they thought that when he got there he would kick the Romans out of Israel and be crowned as the rightful and righteous king! They wanted to be on the side of the winner! It seemed like all they had to do was follow---walk behind him on the road.

Jesus had been telling parables already to the Pharisees. He told them about inviting the poor, the lame, the crippled, and the blind to the feast. He told them that some people will make excuses not to come to the feast. The parable says that some will not come because they just bought property, or bought a cow, or just got married.

Some people reject the invitation to sit down at the table of Christ. They have other things to do, different priorities, conflicting commitments.

And there's that word again---commitment.

So now Jesus is talking to a crowd, a crowd of interested people, people who expect Jesus to be a political force, liberating them from the political oppression of the Romans. They are following him to be saved from the heavy hand of Caesar.

Some people in that crowd saw him as an easy fix. Without any effort on their part, they would soon be free and living in the kingdom of Israel ruled by Jesus the Messiah.

The trouble was that there was no commitment there, no buy-in, no sacrifice. They imagined a different outcome than the one that was about to happen. They didn't understand that the way ahead might be bumpy, that the road was going to be narrow and winding and lead up to the hill called Golgotha and continue right up

on to the cross before it got to the end.

So Jesus, knowing that there are indeed risks, tells them something startling to get their attention---

“Whoever wants to follow me must hate their mother and father, their closest family members.”

He's using exaggeration to get their attention. The same man that taught us to love our neighbors as ourselves did not mean that we should hate those people who are closest to us!

In fact, the word that is translated as "hate" can also be translated as "be indifferent to". So instead of outright hostility, he is saying that we need to be strong enough not to give anyone, even our loved ones priority over following Christ.

If we want to follow and someone we love says, "Don't go," we need to go anyhow. We need to be able to leave behind everyone and everything we love and care for when we make the commitment to follow Jesus Christ. Jesus has already said as much when he told the rich young man to go sell all he owns and when he told another young man that there was no time to go and bury his father first.

Follow! Follow **now!** And follow all the way, wherever the winding and difficult path takes you!

Don't follow mindlessly, he is saying. Know what you are getting into. Calculate the cost of building the tower before you break ground. Calculate the risk of engaging a larger army in battle. Calculate what it will cost you realistically when you make the commitment to follow Christ.

Because it could cost you everything. Jesus gave up everything for us, and he asks the same in return.

The first readers of the Gospel according to Luke were being persecuted by the government when they read these words. There was a very real possibility that they might literally go to the cross for following Christ. These words must have given them strength and determination to face the challenge.

Knowing that they were giving up everything for Jesus Christ and that their reward would be eternal life in the kingdom of God was a source of hope. Every calculated risk they took was another step on the rough road walked by Jesus.

But for us these words seem to be another hurdle, another bend in the road, another rut that can trip us up.

We don't like to think in terms of commitment to doing something difficult.

Or do we?

In fact, anyone who achieves excellence in their field has made and followed through on a commitment to doing something difficult.

Top athletes spend countless hours training and practicing.

They don't become champions by taking the easy way out.

Top musicians have practiced and practiced, 8, 10, 12 hours a day and more, and studied under demanding teachers.

Everyone who has achieved success in their field has practiced, studied, trained, read, learned from experts, and given up a lot of free time, money, energy. Many have sacrificed personal relationships and home lives to be where they are.

Can we be willing to do the same to be excellent Christians?

Jesus says we not only can, but we must.

Because any less commitment is to not be a Christian at all. To put anyone else or anything else ahead of Christ is to worship a false idol.

Because where our hearts are, our treasure will also be there. And if we give first place in our hearts to money, or to our jobs, or even to our families, then money or work or family becomes our god.

Wherever our highest commitment is, there is our god.

This is not an easy thing to say. It's not an easy thing to hear. We all love our families and to hear Jesus say that we must hate them does not sit well with us.

Would I walk away from my family if Christ asked me to?

I have to say yes. If my family came between me and Christ, I would. I pray that I will never have to make that choice.

I have calculated the cost of building a tower for the Kingdom of God, and I pray to have enough strength, energy, wisdom, and commitment to finish it.

The other day I heard from Maddy that John was on a trip, leaving her to do all the chores around the ranch by herself. She had to take care of all of the animals, including going and picking up more hay for the horses. She had to water the garden. She had to hoe and muck out and weed and harvest. It took her many hours.

But then she said something that makes me more determined than ever to go visit her soon----she said,

“If you want a little bit of heaven on earth, you have to work hard for it!”

And so, let's recommit ourselves, on this Labor Day Sunday, to do the work that's required to build a little bit of heaven on earth, to bring the Kingdom of God near to us,

To build a tower in the Kingdom of God!

And let's not anything or anyone stop us!

Amen!