

## Sermon

19 June 2005

Texts: Jer. 20:7-13; Rom. 6:1-11; Matt. 10:24-39

How much does it cost? That's a question we all ask a lot. When we go to the store, we want the best quality at the lowest price, the most for our money. When we're going to go somewhere or do something fun, we look for the best deal. Nobody likes to pay more than they have to.

How much does it cost to be a Christian? No doubt, that sounds like a really strange question. You've probably never heard anybody ask that. In fact, it may sound ridiculous. There's no cost involved, is there? Nobody stands at the entrance to the church on Sunday selling tickets to get in or charging admission. Of course, the offering plate goes around, but everyone gives what they want, and if you don't put anything in, no one says anything to you or asks you to leave. To be a Christian is free, isn't it?

Not according to Jesus, it's not. There's a very high cost. It's not a cost in money, though following Jesus can have consequences for your financial situation. Rather, it's a different cost. In our Gospel text for today, Jesus says that if you follow him, you will be maligned and rejected. People will persecute you. You will have a sword in your life instead of peace. The other members of your own family, your father or mother or brother or sister, may turn against you. He then says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me"; that doesn't sound too nice for Father's Day, does it? "Whoever does not take their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who want to find their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Those are pretty harsh words. But to understand them, you have to understand the context in which Jesus spoke. As most of you know, in the early days of Christianity, those who became Christians were hated. People made fun of them, practiced all kinds of violence towards them, threw them in jail, and even had them killed like Jesus had been killed. If you became a Christian, your whole family might turn against you, reject and ostracize you. That's why Jesus said that if you love your parents or spouse or children more than him, you're not worthy of him; it's not that he didn't want people to love their parents or spouse or kids; rather, he meant that if your parents or spouse or kids rejected you for being his follower, forcing you to choose between Jesus and them, Jesus expected you to choose *him* over *them*. When he says that you need to take up your cross and follow him, and lose your life, he is talking about the high cost involved in following him.

You know, if you read about some of the things they did to some of the first Christians, you'd probably be horrified. Not only were they rejected by their families and friends. At times they were tortured and raped; thrown to the lions; burned alive. That was the price they had to pay for following Jesus. That was the cost.

The prophet Jeremiah knew what it was like to suffer like that. In our Old Testament lesson, he tells God, "You seduced and deceived me. I didn't want to be a prophet and be hated by everyone." In fact, in the verses immediately after our lesson, Jeremiah says, "Cursed be the day I was born; Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, A son has been born to you." Jeremiah suffered tremendously during his ministry of proclaiming God's word. He was thrown into a pit and persecuted in lots of ways; nobody liked him. At the end of his life he had to live in exile, far from his home and family. He hated being a prophet.

Yet he also says in our Old Testament lesson, “If I say, I will not mention the Lord, or speak his name any more, there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.” Something inside of him would not let him stop doing what he was doing. He had to serve God, even though the cost of doing so was so high, and it brought so much pain and suffering into his life. But you know what he was saying? He was in effect saying that the cost for *not* serving God was a lot higher; he couldn’t live in peace with himself if he stopped doing what he was doing.

You know, today, I think we can all be thankful that the world we live in has changed. For the most part, people don’t hate us for being Christians. They don’t persecute and torture us or try to kill us. While that no doubt happens in some parts of the world, and perhaps some of us have faced the rejection of family or friends for following Jesus, and at times are maybe even made fun of, we don’t have to fear for our lives because we are Christians. In spite of that, however, there is still a cost for following Jesus. Following Jesus means living for the things *he* wants us to live for, and not for the things *we* want to live for. It means not doing *our* will, but *God’s* will. It means making sacrifices and giving up things, having a different set of values from other people. It means coming to church even when we don’t feel like it. When we have to make important decisions, like many of you young people who have to make decisions about what you’re going to do with your life, what kind of friends you’re going to have, what price you’re going to pay to be popular in school, being a follower of Jesus Christ can mean choosing the hard way and not the easy way, giving up things you value to go where *Jesus* wants you to go and do what *he* wants you to do. Being a Christian will cost you. It will cost you a lot, more than any amount of many you can imagine.

But you know what? The cost for *not* following God and *not* following Jesus is a whole lot higher. If you really have gotten to know Jesus, you’ll never be able to live with yourself if you don’t follow him. You’ll never have peace in your life and in your heart, as Jeremiah said. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “Those who want to find their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” If you want to run your own life, instead of letting Jesus do it, you’ll never find true life. *That* is a high cost. But if you lose your life for Jesus, if you say instead, “Here, Jesus, here is my life. It’s for you. It’s no longer mine, it’s yours,” *then* you will find true life. Sure, that will cost you in a lot of ways; but what you get in return, both in this life, and in the life to come, is well worth it.

In the end, then, whether you follow Jesus or not, you’re going to pay something. So do you want the best deal? Follow Jesus. That will cost you. But it will cost you a lot more if you decide *not* to follow him. That’s guaranteed. Amen.