

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“Tough Choices”

September 5, 2010

Reverend Art Ritter

Luke 14:25-33

25 Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26 “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27 “Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28 “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29 “Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, “This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.” 31 “Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 “If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33 “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

In October, Laura and I have been invited to participate in a special worship service and meal celebrating the 50th anniversary of Pine Hill Congregational Church in West Bloomfield. It is a church with whom I ministered for nearly 11 years. When I remember Pine Hill Congregational, I remember the huge windows in the front of the sanctuary, allowing worshippers to gaze upon the beauty of creation. When the church was first built there were two beautiful white pine trees that sat in front of those large windows. The trees added to the beauty and provided the added bonus of blocking the early morning sun. The trees were first planted in the late sixties as a memorial by the parents of a young man who had died serving his country in Vietnam.

After a few years, the trees began to have another effect upon the church. Their broad branches scraped the roof and damaged the shingles and wood. Even after trimming the branches, someone noticed that the foundation of the sanctuary next to the trees was cracking. A concrete expert was summoned and he announced that the roots of the tree were the cause. It seemed that the trees had been planted too close to the building. His recommendation was that the trees be cut down.

This was a difficult decision for the church. No one wanted to destroy the beautiful tree which provided a living memorial. Yet no one wanted to continue to make building repairs that would not last. A choice had to be made. On the day the trees were removed, there was a memorial service- to again honor the young man who had died, as well as the natural beauty that was ending.

There is a legend surrounding Winston Churchill, that this history major cannot prove to be false. During World War II, Churchill was forced to make a very painful

choice. It seems that the British intelligence community had cracked the Nazi communication code and had informed Churchill that there was to be a bombing attack on Coventry, England. Churchill could have ordered the immediate evacuations of citizens from Coventry and saved hundreds of lives. This also would have alerted the Germans that their code had been broken and they would have stopped using it. Or Churchill could have taken no action to evacuate, leaving hundreds in harm's way but keeping the Nazi military information flowing and clearly understood, with many more lives spared in the future. Churchill had to choose and he chose the second, more difficult course.

Life is about making choices. Decisions are not always based on what is good and what is bad, but sometimes on what is good and what is better, or what is bad and what is worse. A time of choice can be a time of tension. When we make a choice we open the door to one way and close many doors behind us. When we make a choice we choose to follow a path that forbids us the journey on other paths to other destinations. When we make a choice we pay attention to one voice to the exclusion of all others.

In the fourteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus illustrates the tough choices involved in following him. He speaks to a rather large and enthusiastic crowd; perhaps people convinced that following Jesus would be an easy way to comfort, success, and salvation. But Jesus knew that the way ahead for him would not be easy. He was on his way to Jerusalem and at best, an uncertain future. Jesus' words express caution and warning. He says the way will not be so easy. He says the effort in following him will be taxing. He says that in the path of discipleship, there will be some tough choices.

Jesus speaks of a man who started to build a tower but failed to estimate the cost of construction before he began the job. He did not understand the difficulty of the task before beginning the work. When he was unable to finish the tower, others made fun of him. Taking heed of the tower builder, Jesus says one must contemplate the cost of discipleship before enlisting for duty and making the tough choice for him.

Jesus tells of a king who sets out to wage war against another king, without considering that his enemy has far more soldiers than he has. It would be wiser, Jesus says, to recognize the cost before the battle, and to negotiate for peace.

Jesus is reminding us that the tough choice to follow him, to be a disciple, must be made carefully and intentionally. Following Jesus is not the sort of spontaneous, momentary thrill that we associate with being moved by the Spirit. It is planning and preparation. It is in making tough choices. It is in deciding if the price to pay is more than we are willing to pay before we commit to purchase the product.

William Willimon writes about this Scripture saying, "Jesus, in this text, clearly has no interest in meeting our needs. Rather, he appears intent upon giving us needs we would not have had, had we not met him....The only reason why we're here is not out of our seeking, our wanting. We're here because, in some surprising way, he has sought us, wanted us, called us to walk a way not of our own devising.....Forgive me, forgive the church, for sometimes implying that Jesus will make life easier for you, will fix everything that's wrong with you, will put a little lilt in your voice, a little sunshine in our life. Chances are, he won't. He can do even better than that. He can make you a disciple."

I recall reading a book during my pastoral internship, some twenty-seven years ago entitled *The Sleeping Giant*. It was written by Robert Hudnut, something of a radical among church consultants in the early eighties. Hudnut would not get along well with our Board of Deacons. He proposed that church membership be made more difficult. He wrote about making worship attendance mandatory, service work required for each member, and annual dues to the church treasury compulsory. At the very least he said church membership should be held with the same sense of esteem as the Rotary, Kiwanis or Lions Club. Hudnut suggested that churches would be healthier if they pared their rolls. He reasoned that the best way to “thin the herd” was to give everyone a task that was greater than what they could handle, give them a price to pay, a decision whose choice would actually make a difference. Hudnut’s views were a bit frightening, especially for ministers who seek the support of membership to pay their salaries. Behind the bluster of his suggestions, Hudnut had a point. Church membership and discipleship should not be a series of attractive, frivolous customer friendly options. Instead they need to be a path of thoughtful even difficult choices with clear and meaningful consequences.

One of my Facebook friends shared a quote this week from evangelist and author Tony Campolo. He said that we are in danger of losing younger generations in the church because we have made it too easy for them. We haven’t asked too much of them. We haven’t asked enough of them. We have coddled them in matters of faith and discipleship. We have not challenged them as Jesus challenged his followers. My friend added that much of what he has learned about his faith has come from a challenge, a test, or a choice.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that Jesus is the opposite of a good parish minister. “Instead of making it easier for people to follow, he points how hard it is to follow. He tells them not to get their hopes up too high, that more than likely they cannot afford what they want. He tells them that they should go home and do some sober feasibility studies before they decide to go with him.... . If all of that sounds overly dramatic, then maybe we have lost track of what following him is all about. Is it about being good, stable citizens or is it about changing the world?”

Do I have the will to follow? Can I commit my resources to follow? Am I willing to pay the price to follow? Can I carry through on the task to its completion?

This is what Jesus meant as he spoke to the large crowd on that day long ago. For those who would follow, there would be tough choices. He did not mean that we should always endure pain. He did not mean that we should always seek suffering. But he did mean that following him would mean that we would be making difficult choices that would set us apart from the world. The cross we would bear would be the responsibility to stand back from the culture and to see how our choice from life’s options fit into the values and goals of the building of the Kingdom of God.

There are tough choices in following Jesus. There is a cost to discipleship. Today we are urged to weigh our choice and to count the cost. But the weighing and the counting are always done in the context of God’s commitment to us. In Jesus, God came to share in our situation. In Jesus, God suffered so we would not be alone in our

difficult commitments. In Jesus, God rose over the ultimate obstacle to convey the power that promises to see us through every obstacle that comes into our path.