

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
Life Lessons from Luke: Counting
Rev. Dr. John Judson
September 4, 2022

Genesis 22:1-8; Luke 14:25-33

It was a great project with which to begin my post-Peace Corps career. I was fortunate enough to get a job as a draftsman on what was going to be the first refinery built in more than 20 years. Chevron had decided that the time was right to spend the hundreds of millions of dollars required to design and build such a facility. My task was to create drawings required to link the large storage tanks together and to the refinery. During the process I was promoted from draftsman to checker to check the work of several draftsmen and designers. The pay was excellent, and we were working 50-hour weeks which meant overtime. One day, about noon I got a note from the project manager that I was to report to his office. My first thought was that I was going to get a raise. Instead, I got a pink slip and a check for two weeks wages. The project manager explained that the price of oil had dipped to the point that when Chevron did a cost analysis, they decided that it was not worth continuing the project. So, it was not just me who was being laid off, it was everyone on the project...hundreds of us. Chevron counted the cost and decided to bag it. I offer this story because counting the cost is at the heart of both our stories this morning. They challenge us to ask some tough questions about the cost of being a Jesus follower.

The first story is one of the most difficult stories of the Old Testament, and perhaps of the entire scripture. Abraham and Sarah had been promised by God that they would have a child through whom the promises of God for land, seed, and blessing would flow. Though they tried and tried, the couple entered their later years without any success at producing an heir. Along the way though God had been faithful to them, protecting and providing for them. Abraham had even had a child, Ishmael, with Hagar, the former servant of his wife. Both Abraham and Sarah consoled themselves that Ishmael would be their heir. But that was not God's plan. In their old age, beyond the age of bearing children, God provided a child to them. God gave them Isaac. It was a miraculous event. But then after Ishmael and Hagar had been sent away, God came to Abraham and asked him to sacrifice his son, his only son whom he loved, Isaac. People have wondered why Abraham would have agreed to such a request...and agree without complaining. I would argue that Abraham counted the cost of not obeying and perhaps losing the favor of this God who had protected him for decades. And so, Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son as a measure of devotion to this God who watched over him.

The second story is centered around Jesus asking his followers to count the cost of the journey they were about to undertake. The picture that Luke paints is that of a parade, a parade of people happily following Jesus down the road, listening to every word he said, swapping stories of miracles, mystical experiences, and exorcisms. They were probably also sharing their hopes and dreams of what would happen when they reached Jerusalem. Some thought Jesus would become the great teacher and prophet predicted by Moses. Others thought he might become the high priest, casting aside the corrupt political appointees who held the position. Other might have believed that he would be a new king, or conquering hero. There were probably as many dreams as there were people in the crowd. The one thing few if any of them

were probably thinking was about the cost of following; the cost which Jesus knew was ahead. And so Jesus stops the parade for a “come to Jesus” moment. In this moment he tells them that following him will cost them. It may cost them their friends and families. And let me be clear, the word hate here does not mean, hate as in anger and disdain toward someone, it means to love less. What Jesus is saying is that to follow him we must love our families less than we love him; that Jesus is the primary object of our devotion. Which, in the first century, was a radical concept...much as it is today. In the same way Jesus says that his followers must be willing to say good-bye to all they own if they are to follow him. This is what counting the cost meant for Jesus. But what does it mean for us?

Unlike believers in many places in the world today, who regularly risk their freedom and lives by following Jesus, most of us go through our lives rarely having to count the cost. Certainly, there are moments in which we are confronted with ethical dilemmas when choosing the way of Jesus might prove costly. Yet again, for most of us, these moments are few and far between. Perhaps then we ought to ask ourselves again, what does it mean to count the cost? I would offer you two possibilities.

The first possibility is that we make Jesus the primary object of our devotion. As human beings we have objects of devotion, meaning those things that shape our character, our decisions, our spending, our time, and our love. They are where we focus our lives. For some it is a career. For others it may be family, a school, a volunteer position, or another person. Think about the primary object of our devotion as magnetic north and the needle of our lives always points us to that person, place, or thing. What I believe Jesus asks of us is to chose him as magnetic north. And he asks us to do so not because he has a big ego, but because he is life; because in following him we find life in all the fullness God desires for human beings; a life now and a life forever. And this orientation to Jesus as the primary object of our devotion can be costly because society calls us to follow what they deem to be a priority, and they punish those who do not.

The second possibility, which is an extension of the first possibility, is that because Jesus is the primary object of our devotion that we live in imitation of him, meaning we love radically, we forgive unconditionally, and we serve sacrificially. In other words, we allow Jesus to shape how we interact with the world around us. And this too is dangerous and is part of counting the cost because it means we are to focus on others rather than self. It may mean giving up something that we want to something that others need. I cannot tell you what this looks like in your life because I don't know your circumstances. Yet I believe that these two possibilities offer us a way forward in counting the cost of being a Jesus follower.

My challenge to you then on this morning is this, to ask yourselves, how am I counting the cost of following Jesus by making Jesus the primary object of my devotion and then allowing him to show me how to love radically and forgive unconditionally?