



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 30, 2012

"If" - Luke 14:25-35 (Gospel of Luke Series)

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A number of years back I worked with a senior pastor who, like our Pastor Dan, had a passion of leading others to faith in Christ. He carried this passion with him into the pulpit, but he felt most comfortable speaking with people one-to-one.

Case in Point: I was the youth pastor in his church and I remember the time when a salesperson came to me as we were outfitting a new youth room. She wanted to sell us a new game machine her company had just developed. It was called a Foosball machine. That pretty well dates me, doesn't it?

At least it says I knew a good thing when I saw it. I bought it. Maybe she was just a good salesperson, which she definitely was. But I'm sure we were the first church in America to have a Foosball table, maybe the first outfit anywhere in America to have a Foosball table. Nowadays you don't go anywhere where there's not one.

She was an aggressive salesperson, but ironically she was unprepared to make the sale on the spot. All her contract papers were back at her office. She and I set a time later in the day to meet and seal the deal.

She seemed sharp and a spot-on person, so I was a little surprised when she didn't show up at my office at the appointed time. After

waiting about 30 minutes I went to the front office to inquire of our admin people.

"Oh yes!" they said. "She's been in Pastor's office for 45 minutes." "Really! 45 minutes!" Well, we all waited outside the pastor's office for at least another 30 minutes, but none of us was concerned about what was going on in there. We knew.

Sure enough, two smiling people finally emerged and the pastor said, "Folks I want you to meet the newest child in the Family of God. With misty eyes this woman spoke to each of us like we all had just become family members—and indeed we had. In a little over an hour this woman's life had done a 180. She had been genuinely reborn into the Kingdom of God.

So you can imagine my bewilderment when I was with that same pastor later and witnessed a most amazing thing. He was sharing the simple story of the gospel with an individual—making it as clear and compelling and as easy to understand as it could possibly be done.

The person he was speaking with was obviously moved by the powerful story of God's love in Jesus Christ—a story he said he had never heard explained like this before. He was ready to pray a simple prayer inviting Jesus Christ into his life to be his savior, his

guide, his source of joy and comfort, his friend forever.

It was then that my friend, the pastor, put everything in reverse. He actually began to discourage this man from praying the very prayer he had talked him into praying. I was as confused as I was amazed. As soon as I could I asked my friend, "What's the deal?! What was all that about?" I have not forgotten his answer.

He said, "Sim, I first use every way I know and everything at my disposal to talk a person into receiving Jesus Christ. Then the minute they are sold on doing that I try to talk them out of it because being a disciple of Jesus Christ carries with it a cost, and my desire is to produce not just Christians but disciples for Jesus Christ."

Please forgive a consumer TV illustration, but the principle is clearly here. It's a new non-stick stove pan. They show us how we can burn beans in it and no problem. It all wipes up clean with one swipe of a paper towel. They demonstrate how this pan can do everything except get up and walk to the dishwasher. We are sold. It's then that they flash the figures: three easy payments of \$29.99.

This is not evil—assuming, of course, that the demonstrations are real and the claims for this pan are true. It's just the way things are.

They wouldn't dare show us the figures first or we would never listen to the presentation. We would never know the benefits of the product. We would never be sold. We would never buy and who knows, maybe never get to say one day, "That's the best \$90 I ever spent!"

All this has a huge parallel in the Christian faith. The Christian faith is attractive. From the very beginning people were drawn to Jesus. They realized His claims and promises were true, and the demonstrations of His power and compassion were real. Just to be around Him must have been an experience. As one pastor has put it, "Jesus Christ is the most fascinating person in the Universe—the most wonderful, the most attractive, the strongest, most gracious person this world has ever seen."

But if we follow Jesus very long, we soon will learn there's a cost involved if we want to call ourselves His disciples. Jesus doesn't hide that price tag. He's not sneaky about it. Of course the cost of being His disciple is not the first thing we see or we would be scared off from the start, and we'd never get to know this person as our Savior and Friend.

Well, this sort of thing is happening about mid-way into the Gospel of Luke. The people are totally fascinated by what they've seen. Not only have they heard Jesus speak truth to their minds, but also words that have touched their hearts and souls. They've seen His kindness to hurting people, and His power to heal and make whole. So the crowds are following Him in droves.

Jesus seems concerned for these people who may not know what they're getting into. The price

tag is in full view, but they're not seeing it. So Jesus stops in His tracks—probably when he's reached a high point along the road—and suddenly turns around and says, "Wait, hold the phone, do you guys know where you're going? Do you know what you're getting into?"

Let's read that part in the Gospel of Luke. I'm going to read from Luke, Chapter 14, verses 25 through 35.

So Jesus here outlines the cost of discipleship. We've just asked God to bless the reading of His Word and give us understanding. It was a sincere prayer. This is a difficult passage. It's difficult to understand, and even more difficult to swallow.

You can tell from the very beginning that Jesus means business. You can almost see the stern look on His face. Jesus is not speaking here of being saved from our sins. That's salvation, and salvation is free. It cost God dearly, but it's free to us. Here Jesus is speaking of discipleship. Discipleship is not free. It costs us to be disciples.

I like the way Oswald Chambers puts it. I've read Oswald Chamber's devotional book for many years, "My Utmost for His highest." (And, by the way, in First Prez's renewed emphasis on daily devotionals for 2013 you may want to check this book out if you haven't settled on anything yet).

Years ago I came across Chamber's statement about discipleship. It changed the way I think about this whole subject. I think he's right on. He says:

"Our Lord never insists upon obedience. He tells us very emphatically what we ought to do,

but he never takes means to make us do it. **WE** have to obey him. When our Lord talked about discipleship, He prefaced it with an 'If"—you do not need to unless you like."

Chambers is not talking about receiving Jesus Christ as Savior. He's saying after you've done that you can go a step further in becoming a true disciple of Christ. It's an option we have. We don't have to.

So discipleship is not automatic. Open the door of your heart to Jesus Christ and salvation will happen to you. Discipleship will not. True discipleship occurs only if we enter the door Jesus opens to us. We don't have to go in and we won't be penalized if we don't, but here's that door described in the Luke passage we just read:

"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26 NIV)

Yes, the word is "hate". Can this be the same Jesus whose tender words just 27 verses back melted our hearts when He said:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...How often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."? (Luke 13:34)

Yes, it's the same person and he has not changed. Jesus' use of the word "hate" is a figure of speech common in his day to highlight contrasting ideas.

It would be like listening to a sports analyst choosing whom she thinks will win the BCS National Football Championship next week.

Suppose instead of her saying, "I like Alabama", she said, "I hate Notre Dame". True, it would sound awkward, but it would be I keeping with the figure of speech Jesus used, and it would not mean she despises Notre Dame any more than the other way around means she's in love with Alabama.

Maybe it will help to see how Matthew recorded a statement Jesus made similar to this. It has the same meaning as our Luke passage.

"Anyone who loves his father and mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37,38)

The Christian faith is not a commitment to a creed or set of rules anymore than marriage is. It's all about a relationship with a person—Jesus Christ. So Jesus puts the cost of discipleship first in terms of relationships.

Boy, that's easy isn't it? Relationships—especially easy for men! Men don't have many of those kinds of things going anyway, so not much work for men to do, right?

Well, you know I'm kidding about relationships being easy. They are not. Relationships are difficult for everybody, especially close relationships like Jesus mentions. Following rules would be so much easier.

And speaking of men. In the past couple of weeks I often find myself praying for the dads of those little kids killed in Newtown, Connecticut. There's nothing like the bond between a dad and his kids. I can't imagine what those dads are going through. When Jesus

refers to our children in this passage, where our hearts are, He's hitting deep. I think He's hitting men the deepest.

We're nearing the end of a long holiday period. Families can't wait for the kids to get back to school. And although it's been great having family visit, and although we are sad to see them leave, it's nice for them to get back to their regular routines. Right?

How does that saying go? After three days fish and family relationships start stinking? Relationships can be difficult, especially with close family members.

But if your family is a Christian family certainly that should make a difference. It does. It can make it worse! Why? Because we have greater expectations of one another. And when THOSE relationships fail there's greater disappointment and heartache.

But Jesus here is talking about priority in relationships. What does that look like? Can we prioritize love? I think we can.

I remember after Mimi and I had been married about two years there was a subtle friction that seemed to develop between Mimi and me whenever my mother entered the picture—when she visited or even phoned.

This baffled me because Mimi was becoming more and more fond of my mother, as my mother was becoming fond of her. Then I discovered what the problem was. The problem was me. I had not rearranged my priorities. God's Word clearly says my wife is to be the number one human in my life. She wasn't. My mother was.

I made the switch. I felt it in terms of affection and attentiveness—in terms of where my heart was. My mother still had my affections and I was attentive to her in every way, it's just that from then on Mimi was first in line and I would not allow my mother to break in even if she tried.

There was a cost involved. It caused me pain because I knew it would cause my mother to feel pain. She did. I never said anything about it to her. I didn't have to. My mother was a very wise and perceptive woman.

One minute into our next phone conversation she knew Mimi had my heart and that she didn't. Through the phone wires I could feel her spirit sink (we used to have wires, you know). From that moment on there was clearly a difference in my relationship with my mom.

It was difficult for her to adjust but, like I said, my mother was wise and in the long run she accepted it as a win-win. And that's something we need to know. We need to know that when we prioritize according to God's Word everybody involved wins in the long run. At the beginning it can look like, "Uh-oh, this isn't working!" But if hang in there it will be a winner because God is always after our best interest.

Likewise, if you and I shift our first affections and our first level of attentiveness to Jesus Christ—not to his work mind you, that's a different animal, but to Jesus—we will find that every relationship in our lives will benefit.

In other words if we truly love: father and mother; wife and children; brothers and sisters; and ourselves also we will put Jesus Christ on the throne of our hearts.

And all the above will gain. If we do not, all the above will be the poorer for it.

Secondly Jesus puts the cost of discipleship in terms of the cross: *"Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."*

The cross was on Jesus' mind because that's where he was headed: to Jerusalem and to the cross. These people had no idea what was ahead for them if they kept following Him on that road. Jesus tries to tell them.

We don't have time to consider all that Jesus may have meant when He said, "Take up your cross and follow Me." But there are some things that can be said. First, what it does not mean.

It does not mean we are to sacrifice ourselves for our sins or the sins of anybody else. Jesus did that once and for all. There is no more sacrifice for sin. That sacrifice is finished and done. Every sin that ever was committed or ever will be committed was placed upon Jesus Christ on the cross. He dealt with the sins of the whole world, and they are gone.

His forgiveness is therefore available for whoever acknowledges their need for forgiveness and need for a Savior and receives Jesus Christ, depending upon him alone for their salvation.

There's another misunderstanding about what it means to bear the Cross of Christ. I hope I'm not offending anyone when I say this, but every hardship that comes our way is not to be considered a cross that we have to bear. If a hardship comes because we have taken up our cross, yes. But not

every hardship comes to us that way.

By taking up our cross I think Jesus means that he wants us to carry our Christian faith into the daily world where we live. He wants us to live out our commitment in a natural way, not in a forced or showy way but authentically.

Our granddaughter called me Thursday. Her very first words were, "Papa, do you drink alcohol?" I started to tell her all about Pastor Dan's alcohol story in the Christmas Eve services and about WWJ, "What Would Jesus Drink?"—but I didn't. I thought it best to listen to what she had to say.

So I answered her question and said, "Yes, I drink a little bit if it's for a special occasion like a wedding or a fancy party where there's a toast." I told her the Bible is against being drunk, but it's not against drinking. I told her I had some Christian friends who drank and others who didn't."

She said she felt the same way, but she was in a college sorority where a lot of people drink a lot and if she doesn't drink at all, she wonders if that will scare her friends away from God because they know she a Christian and belongs to God. She was worried they may get drinking or not drinking mixed up with what it means to be a Christian.

I said, "Maryann, you and I have the same problems with this." I was really proud of her because I realized what she was doing. She has taken up her cross and she's following Jesus and she wants to carry her cross responsibly. And further she's giving no thought as to her own reputation. She's worried about the reputation of Jesus.

In this passage Jesus talks about salt staying salty. The more our granddaughter talked about her friends—including a few who ridicule her because of her faith—the more I realized she's like salt in that community, and I told her so to encourage her.

I just said she had the same problems I do? Not really. I can't carry my cross out there like she can or like you can. The world out there watches me and just when I'm hoping my salt has enough saltiness to make a difference they find out I'm a pastor. And poof! It's all over.

Now they understand. You see, I get paid to be salty. And they say "Whew! We're off the hook. We were beginning to think something was missing in our lives, but now we see we're normal after all because pastors, you know, are freaks." Just think, all that good salt wasted!

Not so with you. Make that commitment to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Pick up your cross and get out in the world where God has put you. You don't to have to say a thing, but you better be ready to speak—ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you because somebody will come along side you with a question like, "I don't know what it is you've got but I want some of it."

You won't realize it, but you're going to be solid salt in a very bland and jaded world. It's tremendously excited. And I don't mind saying that I envy you.

And that brings us to the two illustrations Jesus uses. The first is about laying the foundation of a building and not being able to finish it. You know what Jesus says is bad about that? He says it's downright embarrassing.

And you know what weakness I think He is speaking to? It's those of us who have a difficult time making a full commitment. A positive way we put it—we like to keep our options open. When we make a commitment, we down deep already have escape mechanisms in place because something else better or somebody else better may come along.

There are a lot of people who have bought fitness center memberships recently. They've made a New Year's resolution. They are finally going to get in shape. And if you go to one of those places next month it's going to be crowded. In February you'll see a little drop off. By April everything will probably be back to normal again. And if you ask one of those people who dropped out what happened—one of those who forked out all that money to join—they'll make a statement that will keep them from feeling embarrassed.

If that's you, don't give up on commitment. Just get your commitment button fixed.

Finally, Jesus emphasizes that discipleship is costly, but it carries an option—a way out. He compares it to a battle where one king is being approached by another king who has twice as many troops. The odds are against the first king. He is not going to win. He will lose everything, but he can still opt to surrender. There's still time.

Jesus says likewise with discipleship. (Watch this carefully. This illustration is kind of hard to get hold of). If we think we can get involved in being Jesus' disciple and retain the rights to anything for ourselves—the right to our relationships, our possessions, or our own lives also—then we have missed what he has been saying.

Jesus is saying it costs us everything to be His disciple. We still hold the goods, but Jesus asks that we transfer all rights of ownership to him.

But we have an option here. We don't have to do this. If we see what's involved, and don't want to make that move, we can call a truce. Jesus won't make us be His disciples. And He won't penalize us if we are not. Discipleship carries with it an "If".

Why does Jesus make it so costly? He doesn't make it costly. It just is. He's simply stating the way it is. For Him to work his work in us He needs to have all of us all the time. It's just that way.

So the big question is, "What's so appealing about being a disciple of Jesus Christ apart from, of course, it being exciting? (And it must be exciting because it seems the same as getting on an international flight with no idea of where it's going). So apart from the cure for boredom, what's the appeal?"

With the full knowledge that God is good but He's not safe, the appeal is that to be a card-carrying, or rather cross-carrying, disciple of Jesus Christ is to STILL be in the safest, most fulfilling place in the world; with the most fascinating, wonderful, gracious person in the universe.

Let me give you my Proverb:

There are two things that amaze me, that I think will always hold my fascination. They both have wings.

One: The way of a big jet airplane up in the sky — all those people way way up there; and then the way that huge metal object seems to float in the air as it lands. I

cannot keep my eyes off of big jet airplanes.

Two, the way of a hen as she gathers her chicks under her wings. I've always been fascinated by how the chicks know exactly what to do.

I try to take photos of hens with chicks here on our campus around our parking lot, but I can't get close enough. The hens do their job too well,

I'll end with the chicks.

Many times as I have driven from work going back over the Pali from Ko'olau I have seen a hen with her chicks by the side of the road. Cars are whizzing by at 50 miles an hour and more, and those chicks are just inches from the highway. Yet, those chicks are totally unconcerned. They are as happy as can be, and I've never seen a dead chick yet. Those chicks are committed to that hen—the safest most fulfilling place to be. If they were on their own—watch out!

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often have I longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

Chicks don't have an option. Instinct makes them obey. You and I have an option. Discipleship carries with it an "If". It would be a great New Year's Resolution to get under those wings—provided, of course, that our commitment button is fully operational.

Let's pray. "O Lord, He (or she) who has ears to hear let them hear." In Jesus' Name, Amen.