

“20”
Counting the Cost
September 28, 2014

PRELUDE – Lift My Life Up
Worship Songs – O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

Intro Video – Church Etiquette

Drama – Disconnected
Feature – Do Something

Good morning everyone.

In the Gospel of Luke chapter 14 verse 25 we read that a large crowd was following Jesus. Of course, this was not unusual. After all, the people of first-century Palestine had never seen anyone like Him:

- A man who spoke the truth of God with authority unlike the scribes and Pharisees – the teachers of the Law of Moses.
- A man who did wondrous miracles of healing and deliverance from demons, even multiplying limited stores of food so that multitudes could be fed.
- A man who claimed to be more than “just a man”; who claimed to be one with the Father in Heaven, the literal embodiment of the Divine in human flesh.
- A man who represented, at last, the coming of God’s Kingdom into this world with its radical message of grace and mercy for sinners like you and me.
- A man whose transforming power could literally change the eternal destiny of those who believed in Him – bringing them from death to life, from darkness to light and making them victors over sin’s curse instead of victims of it.

“A large crowd was following Jesus” because he was, in the words of the song we just heard, *doing something*. He was fulfilling his purpose. He was carrying out his mission. He was changing the world for good and for God and people were excited by that.

“A large crowd was following Jesus” but then, a very curious thing happens.

The Gospel of Luke chapter 14 verse 26 tells us that ...

He turned around and said to them, “If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.”

Luke 14:25-27 (NLT)

And, as if that wasn’t throwing *enough* cold water on the fire ...

Jesus added:

“But don’t begin until you count the cost ... for you cannot become my disciple without giving up everything you own.”

Luke 14:28,33 (NLT)

Strong words!

And because they come from the mouth of Jesus, Christians throughout the centuries have attached great significance to these words.

And that's a good thing because obviously, Jesus is saying something of great importance; something designed to cause people who were following Him around the countryside to stop and think deeply about what they were doing. Jesus was drawing a line in the sand, one that you and I would do well to consider ourselves.

Unfortunately, however, I think this is one of those cases where we sometimes attach more significance to something Jesus said than what He may have intended.

Now, make no mistake; Jesus *is* being incredibly serious here. But sometimes when people read this they *think* He's saying, "Look, if you want to be saved from your sin, I'll be happy to do that for you. But in return, you must agree to give up everything and follow Me. *Doing what I tell you to do* has to become more important to you than loving your family. It has to become more important to you than even your own life. Otherwise, you'll be on the wrong side of the line."

I've actually heard that interpretation preached with great passion and seen people many respond to it.

And, again, make no mistake: *doing what Jesus says* – living the way God wants us to live instead of the way the world tells us or our flesh drives us or the forces of demonic darkness tempt us – is a good thing. The only problem with this interpretation – "do what Jesus says so that He will save you" – is that it's not *grace*.

And that's a big deal because over and over again we read in the New Testament – in the words of Jesus and his Apostles – that salvation is not a result of anything we do. It's by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone – in what Jesus did when He gave His life on the cross as our substitute, taking into His own flesh the judgment penalty we should rightfully receive as sinners. "Believe and receive and be saved" *not* "listen and obey and be saved" is the most foundational aspect of the gospel!

So, contrary to what some have believed, this strong statement of Jesus to the crowd that's following Him has nothing to do with salvation.

"Disciple" Defined

Well then, what *is* He talking about?

Actually, it's right there in the first sentence and then repeated *three more times*. So, let's read it again and, this time, let's pay close attention.

To the crowds who were following Him ...

He turned around and said to them, "If you want to be my [what?] disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison—your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my [what?] disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my [what?] disciple." Luke 14:25-27 (NLT)

And then he added:

"But don't begin until you count the cost ... for you cannot become my [what?] disciple without giving up everything you own." Luke 14:28,33 (NLT)

What's Jesus talking about here? Being His what? His *disciple*.

Now, again (and unfortunately), this is one of those words that gets kind of trumped up because "it's in the Bible" and Jesus talks about it a lot *and* we don't use it in everyday conversation. So, we tend to over-spiritualize what it means.

But to the people who first heard Jesus make this statement (and, if you know anything of the story of Jesus, you know that they heard

Him repeat it on *many* occasions), “disciple” – which comes from a Greek word meaning “a learner or student of a specific teacher”ⁱ – was a pretty common word. And discipleship – students devoting themselves to learning from specific teachers in both the Greek world and Hebrew world – was a pretty common practice.

So, the people listening to Jesus would have known exactly what He was talking about. But it’s *not* what comes to mind when you and I think of the relationship between students and teachers today. For them, the word “disciple” went beyond merely “soaking up knowledge” as we might think of students in a classroom today. Actually, the word in our language that best approximates what people heard when Jesus said “disciple” is “apprentice”ⁱⁱ – someone who learns the trade of a master craftsman or a highly skilled professional in some field.

And the goal of an apprentice (or a disciple) is to become like the teacher and ultimately (in one form or another) to do what the teacher is doing.

If you’re an apprentice to an electrician, your goal isn’t to just learn about electricity. It’s to wire buildings so that people have power at their disposal. If you’re an apprentice to a leader in an organization, you’re not there just to learn about leadership. Your goal is to one day lead something yourself – maybe even that same organization.

So, when Jesus talks to the great crowd of people who are following Him about being his disciple, He’s really saying:

- “If you want to live the kind of life I am living and do the kinds of things I’m doing ...
- “If you want to see God’s Kingdom come in power and impact others through your life and your actions ...
- “If you want to do something in this world for good and for God ...”
- “If you want to become my apprentice

... there’s something really important that you need to know.”

And we’ll get to that in just a minute but, first, I think it’s really important to understand that a lot of people in that day were big fans of Jesus. I mean, He was a big deal. And *some of those people* (not all but some) were so fired up that they wanted to join up.

“This is the greatest thing ever!” they said to themselves. “Jesus is *doing something* and I want to be in on it. I want to see God’s power at work in this world. I want to see people changed. I want to see people healed. I want to see people set free to be who God intended them to be.

- “I want to be more than just a *consumer* of ministry.
- “I want to be more than just a *cheerleader* for ministry.
- “I want to be a *contributor* to ministry. I want to be doing what Jesus is doing. I want to be apprenticed. I want to be a disciple.”

And the same thing happens today. Even though Jesus is not here in the flesh, his Spirit and His body – the Church – *is*. And in spite of the fact that sometimes the church in this world gets messed up (because it’s full of messed up Christians – including the leaders), great and amazing things still happen through it. And those great and amazing things have the same effect on a lot of people today as they did in Jesus’ day.

I’ve written about this in my weekly “Note From Rick” (which is emailed every Friday to those who have signed up for the Pastor’s Blog on the church website), but the Sunday after we celebrate our 20th anniversary, the church that I grew up in, the group of people who did more to shape who I became as an adult than any other influence – Grace Baptist Church in Bowie, MD – is going to be celebrating its 50th anniversary. And I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately.

I’ve been thinking how grateful I am for the great and amazing things that happened to me there.

- For the investment they made in (and have continued to make) in kids like me.
- That they kept pointing me to Jesus and encouraged me to live my life with Him at the center.
- For their wisdom and love that kept me from falling into the pit that so many others my age fell into.
- That I was instilled with a purpose: that no matter what you do (and I can still hear Jackie Byrd, our youth leader saying these) “whether you program computers or dig ditches or preach sermons, *give it all you’ve got because you’re doing it for the glory of God. You’re serving the Lord.*”

Something about that experience of receiving from them created in me a desire to help others experience what I had experienced.

So, when I grew up and moved away, I wanted to do whatever I could to help whatever church I was part of (as a college student and then as a software engineer) to accomplish its vision and mission. Long before it ever occurred to me to become a pastor as a full-time occupation, I was motivated by that thought. I wanted to be more than a consumer or a cheerleader. I wanted to be a contributor in some way.

And just so you’ll know, that’s not saying anything special about me because it’s happened to so many of you as well. You’ve had a similar experience to mine. You could say about North Heartland Community Church – this particular expression of the Body of Christ – the kinds of things I said about Grace Baptist Church in Bowie. Or you could say it about a church that invested in you and influenced you long before you came here.

And, as a result, you want to be more than just a consumer or a cheerleader. You want to be a contributor. *Jesus is doing something in this world.* And He’s doing much of it through His church (imperfect though it may be) and you want to be in on it.

By the way, since I’ve mentioned it three times, let me point out that people who are favorably disposed towards Jesus (both now and in His time on earth) typically fall into one of three categories:

- Those who receive the ministry of Jesus (and his disciples) are *consumers of it.*
- Those who follow and watch as Jesus (and his disciples) do ministry are *cheerleaders for it.*
- Those who join in with what Jesus (and his disciples) are doing are *contributors to it.*

Every person who is connected to Jesus – every Christian – is a consumer, a cheerleader or a contributor.

And contrary to what you may have heard ...

- There’s nothing wrong with being a consumer. In fact, *you can’t be saved without being a consumer.* Remember, the requirement for salvation is to believe and receive. By definition, that’s consuming!
- And there’s nothing wrong with being a cheerleader. Every leader and every team benefits from people who surround them with support and encouragement.

So, I think it’s reasonable to say that those of us who are Christians *should always be* – at some level – consumers of and cheerleaders for the ministry of Jesus and the church.

However, I think every Christian also, at some point, experiences an urge to move beyond *only* consuming and *only* cheerleading. I think every Christian at some point feels drawn to be “doing something” like Jesus was “doing something.” To use the terminology that Jesus himself used, I think every Christian at some point has a desire to become an apprentice; a disciple; a *contributor.*

And I think that urge ... that leading ... that desire ... comes from God. I think it’s the work of the Holy Spirit in us (if we’re Christians), saying to us, “this is ultimately what I have in mind for you and you will not find true fulfillment as my child until you embrace it. You freely receive so much. And now, to be truly content, you must become a giver in some form or another.”

In fact, Jesus once said that (exactly) to his first disciples.

“As you go, preach this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven is near!’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give.”

Matthew 10:7-8 (NLT)

Later, one of Jesus’ best friends (Peter) echoed the same idea when he wrote:

God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps.

1 Peter 2:21 (NLT)

And the Apostle Paul wrote:

Imitate God in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God.

Ephesians 5:1-2 (NLT)

Paul and Peter are saying much the same thing: Jesus gave himself for you. Now, you turn around and do the same thing for others. You have received and are receiving from God; and the natural by-product of that is to become a contributor in some way so that others can receive as you have received.

A Price to Be Paid

Now, at this point I know that some of you are thinking, “Well, Rick, this is all very interesting. Thank you for the word study on ‘disciple’ and ‘discipleship.’ But why are you telling us this? What does this have to do with anything? How does it relate to ‘what motivated the launch of this church 20 years ago and continues to motivate us today?’”

Well, let’s go back to that statement Jesus made to the crowd that was following Him. Remember, He said ...

- “If you want to be my disciple, my apprentice ...”
- “If you want to live the kind of life I am living and do the kinds of things I’m doing ...
- “If you want to see God’s Kingdom come in power and impact others through your life and your actions ...
- “If you want to do something in this world for good and for God ...”

... there’s something really important that you need to know: *it’s going to cost you*. A lot. Maybe even everything.”

“Because when you get involved in helping to spread the Gospel that I preach, some of the people who are closest to you – including your family – are not going to be happy. What I say and do differs from their religious tradition or their political persuasion or their national interest and they’re going to be threatened by you. They’re going to feel judged and condemned by you when you follow my way instead of theirs. And you’re going to have to deal with that. If you’re going to be my disciple, you’re going to have to put Me and what I say ahead of them and what they say and deal with the consequences.”

“Furthermore, when you get involved in doing something for good and for God, there are going to be things you want to do for yourself – things that aren’t necessarily bad or evil; just things that will make your life easier and more comfortable; things that are just *fun* – there are going to be things you want to do for yourself that you will have to give up. If you’re going to be my disciple, you won’t be able to spend every weekend at the Lake or every Sunday at Arrowhead or on the golf course or sleeping in. You won’t be able to spend every penny on yourself and those in your own little circle of influence.”

Now, if you think about it, what Jesus was saying really wasn’t that much different from what we already know.

No one ever changes *the* world without first giving something up of *their* world.

That's just how it works.

And Jesus lived out that principle in his life and in his death.

- He left the comforts of Heaven for this Earth.
- He gave up his divine powers and became a man who did what he did by faith.
- He suffered abuse that, by rights, the King of the Universe should never have to take from his subjects.

But He wanted to change the world and that's what it took – giving up something of his world, even to the point of giving up his life.

And, by the way, there are people throughout history who have done that same thing for His cause. Right now, today, there are people half-a-world away who are being forced by “The Islamic State” to either recant their faith and commitment to Christ or die at the point of a sword. And many of them are giving up their lives. It's a terrible price to pay to be a disciple but they are paying it.

Closer to home – and a little less dramatic and traumatic – for those of us who want to be contributors to the work that Jesus is doing in his church (and not just consumers or cheerleaders), what will it cost us?

That's a question we thought about early on and whenever I would recruit someone to the core group of people who were going to launch this church, I tried to spell it out for them. “Here's what it's going to take. Before you join up, count the cost.”

And the price tag we put on it back then is still pretty much the same today, although 20 years of history has made it a lot clearer now that it was. So, if I was recruiting someone to help make NHCC “go” I would tell them it's going to cost them in four ways.

In fact, why don't we just pretend that's what I'm doing with you right now? I'm going to tell you what it's going to take for you to get in on what God is doing through NHCC; what it cost you to be part of us together accomplishing what God put this church here to accomplish.

And I understand that some of you don't really care at this point in your life. Some of you aren't really able at this point in your life.

But some of you are fired up about what God has done in your life thru this church or another church and you feel an urge, a leading and a desire to get in on being a part of making that happen for someone else who you may not even know yet.

It's going to cost you in four ways.

Cost #1. You will experience the pain of failure and disappointment.

And if we had time, I could tell you painful story after story of failure and disappointment over the past 20 years. From a leadership perspective there have been ...

- So many strategies that we tried that just didn't work.
- So many decisions we made that were just dumb.
- So many things that I did and said as the senior pastor that were just insensitive and wrong. (Last week???)

On the personal side – and many of you have experienced this – there have been ...

- So many people who came to NHCC looking for hope and friendship and didn't find either. (That drama we saw? It was a true story. We saw the happy ending version this morning but there have been countless times where the person didn't get invited for “pizza” or whatever, and just stopped coming).

- So many people who came to NHCC and seemed to connect with what we're doing. They believed and received Jesus and got baptized. I even became friends with some of them. And then they just fell away. They vanished. They left the church or left their spouse. They just walked away without a word.

And the list could go on and on – and it will as long as you stay in the game – because the truth is, if you're a disciple – if you're a contributor – you're going to plant the seed and a lot of it is going to be wasted.

Jesus once told a story about that. A farmer went out to sow, he said, and pretty much 80% of what he put out was lost. It fell on the rocks, the birds ate it, or it came up and died off quickly because it had no root. But the farmer kept sowing, Jesus said, because the 20% that worked ended up producing a crop of a hundredfold. He understood that all the lost effort and wasted seed – the failure and disappointment – was a price worth paying for that result.

And if you're going to be part of what God is doing in this church (or in any church) – whether you're the pastor or a layperson – you have to accept that. You have to deal with the pain of it and keep on keeping on.

The second cost if you're going to be part of helping others experience what you have experienced is that ...

Cost #2. You will have to put your perceived spiritual needs *second* (behind those of “seekers.”)

And by “seekers” I mean those who have not yet experienced what you have experienced.

I'll say more about this next week and what it looks like in more specific terms but, very simply, if you're going to be part of a church like NHCC that prioritizes reaching seekers – people who are outside of it; people who are not acculturated to “church life” and “church think” but who are showing up at our invitation to investigate Christ and Christianity – you have to subordinate what you need to what they need. You really do need to see yourself more as a contributor and less as a consumer.

That doesn't mean that what feeds your soul isn't important. It just means that it might not be the main thing we do and you'll need to meet that need in another way.

For example, through the years, people have said to me ...

- Why don't you do verse by verse teaching, Rick? That's what really feeds my soul.
- Why don't we sing for 25 minutes like they do at Vineyard, Rick? That's how I get fed.
- Why don't we do this program or that program? That's what really gets me going spiritually.
- Why do you do waste time in services with those silly dramas or secular songs or clips from movies? That stuff doesn't feed me at all.

And I have to say to them we're probably never going to do verse by verse. We're probably never going to sing for 25 minutes. That doesn't mean you need to give those things up. You just need to do them on your own ... *and* ... invest yourself in helping us do what it takes to connect with seekers. To use the feeding metaphor, we need to feed them before we feed ourselves.

Actually, if you believe what Jesus said, we feed ourselves *by* feeding them. And, again, I'll more about that next week but let's move on.

The third cost if you're going to be part of this church helping others who do not yet know Jesus experience what you have experienced is that ...

Cost #3. You will have to let go of legalism and tradition (and focus on grace instead).

This one is really hard, especially if you've been a Christian for a long time; especially if you've been part of another church or a

denomination for a long time.

One of the decisions we made early on at NHCC was that we were going to keep the main thing the main thing and not get sidetracked into debating lesser points of theology and church practice. We decided we were going to keep the main thing the main thing and not get sucked into organized political or cultural battles.

And that decision has had two consequences.

- One, it's made us appealing to seekers who want to know God and it's given our message – the good news of the truth and grace found in Jesus – great clarity.

So much so that *even longtime believers* come to me on a regular basis and say, “Rick, I know you preach with seekers in mind but I feel like you're talking right to me. I'm learning things and experiencing things in my relationship with God and others like I never have before.”

- The other consequence of keeping the main thing the main thing is that it's required longtime mature Christians – who are incredibly valuable to a ministry like ours; it's required them to release some of their most cherished traditions and positions on issues that really aren't the main thing.

For example, we have women in leadership here; pastors who teach from this stage on a regular basis. But a lot of us come from traditions where we've been taught that that's just not biblical. (Of course, we also haven't been taught the other position – the one that says it *is* biblical). We also don't do communion every week; we don't baptize infants; and we don't have a pastoral prayer in each service. I don't preach from the King James Version only. (I hardly ever use it).

In all of these things, we decided a long time ago that we're not going to fight about it because sincere, godly Christian people have had differing opinions concerning these issues ... for centuries!

And if you're going to be part of NHCC, you have to give up the right to be right on these things because they're just not the main thing.

So, the cost of being part of what God is doing here at NHCC so far, if you're keeping score ...

- The pain of failure and disappointment
- Having to subordinate your needs to the needs of someone else less mature spiritually
- Letting go of legalism and traditions so that we can keep the focus on the main thing, which is the truth and grace of Jesus.

And there's one more cost (at least that we have time for this morning). And it's a big one.

Cost #4. You will have to liberally invest “the three T’s required for every church to succeed ... Time, Talent and Treasure.

Every church needs lots of people who will give up – who will sacrifice for the cause – their time, their talents (i.e. their skills, their special abilities, and their spiritual giftedness) and their treasure (money).

Early on, I would tell people “if you're going to be part of NHCC, you'll need to invest more here than you might in some other church ... *because* ... we're a church that puts a high priority on reaching people who aren't church people. And people who aren't church people; people who aren't Christians typically don't invest *anything*” (which makes sense because *they haven't yet experienced something* that would produce an urge, a leading or a desire to get make “church” happen for someone else).

And some people would step up. And some would say “no thanks. Call me whenever you get things going.”

And the same thing is true today. We still need people who will invest their time and talent serving in a volunteer capacity. And in your program, you’ll find the same volunteer spec sheet we put in last week ... because last week, when I told you to fill out and turn in the communication card in the program, we had already used the communication card to sign up for the picnic next Sunday. (Yet another example of failure and disappointment!)

So, if you’re interested in finding out more about how you can invest your time and talent ... today, when you leave, you can turn in the card with your name and contact information and write “how can I help?” and someone will get back with you this week.

Now, let’s talk about the other “T” treasure – or money – for a just a bit. Do you know what the last thing that a person new to church will bring to church is? It’s their wallet (or their purse) ... which means that churches like ours struggle mightily to meet their expenses.

Now, don’t get me wrong. We pay our bills and we pay our staff. But we are just so tight all the time that we end up cutting things we need to do and have very little for things we’d like to do ... such as the things I mentioned last week that need to be fixed or improved around here in order to maintain a level of excellence. (And if you weren’t here last week when I talked about why excellence matters, I encourage you to watch, read or listen online).

But here are the things that desperately need to be done.

(pic) We need to repave our parking lot and the road around our building. (\$120K)

(pic) We need to clean up the west side that faces the new Eye Care Center (\$5-10K)

(pic) We need to create a playground outside of Adventureland that faces the new walking trail that goes on the south side of our building (\$18K)

In addition, we’d like to improve landscaping in general (\$5K) and also improve cameras, lighting and control here in the auditorium (\$16K).

When you add it all up, it’s about \$165K ... that we don’t have ... that we need ... soon. In addition, we’re about \$60K (or 7.5%) behind on our regular budget for this year.

So, we need two things.

- First, we need people to give to the regular offering so we can close the \$60K gap. I’m pretty sure that will happen as it does every year. But I just want to bring it up.
- Second, we are going to do a very brief, very targeted capital campaign. It’s going to last 3 months – from now until Christmas.

... and we’re calling it “The Excellence Challenge.” From now through Christmas our goal is to raise the \$165K we need to make things excellent.

And we’re not going to do pledge cards or anything like that. We’re just going to ask everyone to give over and above what they currently give to NHCC. Just write “excellence challenge” on your check or go online to our website and fill out that space.

And we’ll keep track of it every week from now until Christmas.

It's not sexy to give to a building program ... <more info in the mail this week>

Why Bother?

Ok, let's bring this to a close.

We've talked about some pretty hard things and one of the questions has to be ... so why would anyone do it? Given the tangible and intangible costs, why would anyone say "yes" to the urge, leading or desire to get in on doing good for God through this church – or any church?

That's a great question. The answer is that whenever Jesus said something like ...

*"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."
Luke 9:23 (NIV)*

He would almost always add ...

*"For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it." Luke
9:24 (NIV)*

It's a paradox. It's when we give that we truly receive. It's when we serve that we truly are served. It's when we give up our lives for his sake, he gives it back to us.

That's why Jesus once said ...

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke on you and learn from me [code words for "discipleship], because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."
Matthew 11:28-29 (NET)*

When you have been remade inside through your faith in Christ as your savior, *this* is what you're remade *for*: to be an apprentice of Jesus; learning from him not just for the sake of learning but learning and growing so that you can do the kinds of things that He did. And in that yoke – in that way of living, you will find not weariness and not a burden but rest for your soul.

And this morning as we close I want to invite you to experience that. I want to invite you to say "yes" to Jesus' invitation to be not just a consumer or cheerleader but to be a contributor in whatever way you can say that this morning. I want to invite you to take the risk of saying "yes, Jesus, come build your Kingdom in me and through me. For we together are the light of the world."

And the way we're going to do that is with a time of worship. We're going to sing two songs together and if this is the desire of your heart, I invite you to participate with all your heart.

So, let's stand together and sing.

Worship – Build Your Kingdom Here / We Are

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. Offering@door (turn in card "how can I help?")
2. Baptism sign up reminder

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://www.htmlbible.com/sacrednamebiblecom/kjvstrongs/STRGRK31.htm#S3101>

ⁱⁱ <http://mathetes.co.uk/>