

**Enough to Complete It**  
A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall  
Fairmount Presbyterian Church  
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**Text: Luke 14:25-33**

I've never understood the appeal of so-called "reality" TV. Nothing could hold a candle to the real deal. Who could imagine.... That in a time of terrorism and warfare, after years of hostilities and posturing, North Korea has agreed to declare and dismantle all its nuclear facilities? Or who would have thought that a spiritual icon like Mother Teresa struggled her whole life against doubt and disbelief? Who has even heard of a place called Appalachian State College? (though you needn't have gloated quite so much!) Fact is, reality holds more than enough intrigue, drama, and surprise to provide multiple opportunities every single day for discovery and delight....as well as defeat and discouragement. Despite careful planning, thoughtful preparation, and considered decision-making, we never really know what will happen around the next bend in the road.

We're worshipping today on the threshold of a new program year, the beginning of Fairmount's 91<sup>st</sup>. Yet always our collective eye is trained toward the future: what can we do today to renew faith, strengthen our connections with each other, and reach out beyond our walls to serve and welcome, that will help us reach our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary strong and faithful and vibrantly alive? Have we got the stuff to make it, come what may?

The morning gospel text asks the same question, and offers a challenging response. Picture the scene at the height of Jesus' popularity. There's buzz in town and countryside about his dynamic preaching, his healing powers, his sense of purpose and authority. Crowds are attracted wherever he goes. Many want to join him. Here Jesus extends a clear invitation, but it's not the casual, come-as-you-are, try-it-you'll-like-it approach adopted by his latter-day followers. This makes it sound serious, a warning to know what you're getting into and to decide whether or not you can sign on for the long haul. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading from the gospel according to Luke, in the fourteenth chapter at the 25<sup>th</sup> verse.

[LUKE 14:25-33]

Summer time and the living is easy. So one evening, instead of reading an important book or weeding the tomato bed, I went to see *Knocked Up*, filmmaker Judd Apatow's raunchy yet ultimately traditional take on family values. The film follows the consequences of an improbable one-night stand between slacker Ben Stone and an up and coming reporter, Alison Scott who becomes pregnant through the encounter. Having and raising a child is the last thing on either of their minds.

When Ben's multiply-married dad tells Ben that he is the best thing that ever happened to him, Ben replies, "Now I feel sorry for you." Despite extreme trepidation, Alison decides to keep the baby, and surprisingly, Ben sticks with her, though he's reluctant to read the graphically-illustrated birthing books. They even break up in the obstetrician's office, but you understand that it's only a speed bump on a road they will see through to the end. As the credits roll, baby pictures of cast members flash by. It's as if Apatow wants us to remember that child-bearing under any circumstance is the craziest, most self-denying and most hopeful thing humans do.

The movie came to mind as I read this text, so uncompromising in its demand and so self-denying in its vision. This invitation to follow Jesus changes everything, and exacts a cost for new growth. In fact, the cost is all or nothing.

When we imagine the scene, and Jesus surveying the large crowd and then calling to them, "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple. . . .whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. . . .whoever does not give up all that he has cannot be my disciple. . . .*" it's downright astonishing that the verse after that doesn't read "Now the next day few people followed Jesus."

What is Jesus talking about? Clearly he's not telling the crowds to hate their parents and abandon their children. He's using hyperbole to confront them with their priorities. He's saying that nothing is more important than one's relationship with God. No one can serve two masters—it's impossible to commit when you have a divided heart. Knowing this, Jesus asked the people who thought they wanted to follow him to decide what their highest priority would be.

And I think he sounds so uncompromising because the stakes are so high. Who or what we love tells so much about who we are and how we will live. And with a truthfulness born of his great love, Jesus asks us to love God first, and when we're clear about that, all other priorities will find their proper place. Jesus follows this up with two analogies intended to allow further consideration. Just as it's unwise to embark on a building campaign without a feasibility study, or to prepare for war without an exit strategy, a casual approach to one's commitment to God leaves one vulnerable to defeat. I don't believe it's intended as a threat ("do this or else"), but as honest risk assessment. Though this text doesn't specify the particular dangers and sacrifices inherent in following Christ, it's as if Jesus wants would-be followers to understand that this is risky business. The life of Christian faith is difficult. Author Flanner O'Connor, a devout Roman Catholic who suffered debilitating illness and died young commented on this point: "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe." [quoted

in the *New York Times* op ed piece, September 3, 2007] Consider the cost, not to deter you from responding to the call, but so that when the going gets tough, you will not fall away.

It would be a mistake, I think, if we were to use this text as justification for not joining Jesus on the way; if we decided, for example, that we didn't have enough money or personnel or daring to follow. We're pretty good at creating barriers against serious engagement with our faith, and with our faith community: I don't have time; we don't have resources; it's too far; it's too much; I don't agree with them; and on and on. I guess you could say that's "counting the cost," but it surely contradicts God's extravagant, boundless grace poured upon us in abundance. Rather, Jesus asks for a singular commitment: to finish the journey, regardless of the dangers and setbacks, the losses and discouragement. Jesus invites each of us to sign on for the long haul. The resource needed to build the tower (or grow a church!) is the resource of commitment. We do not need to have the stones (or members!) in hand, or even to know where they will come from, but we need to know that we have the commitment to find them and will not be deterred when that becomes difficult.

Today we [will dedicate and commission][have dedicated and commissioned] persons who have found spiritual energy making music for the glory of God and teaching and leading children and youth. You cannot say that any of these people "have time" to do this. They've made time because it's a priority. You cannot say that all these people feel especially qualified and may even feel inadequate for the particular challenges of, say, managing 5 bells and ringing them in the proper sequence and in the right rhythm; or answering a 6-year-old's question about what circumcision is. For some reason—thank God!—these individuals have made a commitment to the mission of Christ's church, and are going to do it, no matter what.

Is it enough? Enough to complete it? Well, think of Mother Teresa. Like many of us, I used to hold her in another category all together: there were Christians and then there was Mother Teresa—so holy, so selfless, so faithful that she was beyond belief. And now we know something of her inner struggles, even a sense of profound spiritual emptiness. The thing that makes her compelling and worthy of emulation is that she served the sick and poor of Calcutta without knowing for sure that her work was of God; without knowing for sure that God was even there. Her commitment did not depend upon certainty or spiritual clarity, but upon a promise she made as a young postulant to follow Christ wherever that might take her.

It's the same invitation Christ extends to you and me. Be very clear about this: only everything is enough. God wants the love of all our heart and all our soul and

all our mind and all our strength. Anything less is like saying you're a little bit pregnant. You can't be a little bit Christian.

We can, however, be assured that it is worth the cost. The One who demands it also paid it. The questions Jesus put to the crowd, "Which of you would fail to make an assessment before building a tower? Which of you would disregard intelligence reports before starting a war?" would have generated immediate responses: "None of us." And neither would God! God has calculated the cost. God knows what it takes to build—a tower, a kingdom, a life. God knows the strength of the enemy forces. And God intends to finish what God has started. God will prevail. God will bring all that God has created and loved to completion.

So, friends, let's get to it, without fear of a future which is already certain. Well, actually it's okay to be a little afraid, because this is the craziest, most self-denying, and most hopeful thing we will ever do. Don't let the fear keep you from commitment. We're following One who is always ahead of us, urging us forward. One step at a time. You and I can take one step, yes? And another. All the way to God's finish line. In the face of enmity we will strive to love. Despite threat of terrorism and the shadow of nuclear warfare, we will keep working and praying for peace. As a church we'll make mistakes and engage in hard work, but we will stick together and persevere. After even humiliating defeats, we will try again (and again!). Whether knocked down (or up), God is laboring within us to deliver new life.

All that matters is what you love *first*. That's all...and by God's grace, it will be enough.

**NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.**