

The cost and the joy

1 Corinthians 8:1-13, Luke 9:23-24

February 1, 2009

*You call us into your church,
to accept the cost and joy of discipleship ...*

We know something about cost and joy.

Maybe you want to finish off some space in the basement for a rec room, and instead of hiring a contractor to do all the work, you do it yourself! You cut and nail the studs. You hang the insulation. You haul in the heavy sheets of drywall and screw them into the strapping on the ceiling while your wife and children strain to hold them in place! You tape and sand the seams. You spray the texturing and prime and paint the walls. It costs you -- time and labor and sweat, as well as money -- but there is joy and great satisfaction in seeing the finished room knowing that you did it yourself.

Or maybe you're a wrestler. I never wrestled competitively, but I roomed with wrestlers in college. And, man, were they grouchy during wrestling season! They pushed their bodies so hard, training and cutting weight. We'd go through the cafeteria line -- I'd fill my plate while my roommate might pick out ... a small bowl of fruit! They paid a price, faces drawn and pale, bodies beaten up. But there was joy for them, too. They competed to win, but the joy was not just in the winning. There was joy in disciplining their bodies, in pushing themselves to perform at their best.

Or maybe you've given birth! For thirty-eight weeks your body served as a human host for a growing fetus and you endured the hours -- however many hours! -- of difficult and painful labor. But you know the joy, the miracle of a new life that comes from you and carries something of you in it. You know that joy would not, could not, exist without cost.

Or maybe you've climbed a mountain. During seminary, I took a course entitled "Wilderness Training for Christian Maturity." As part of the course, we spent two weeks in the wilderness, in the mountains. My favorite experience during those two weeks was the day we climbed the Northslide on Mt. Tripyramid.

The Northslide is an open ledgy slope that runs up the face of the mountain at an angle of 55 degrees. Now the steepest of black diamond expert ski trails run no steeper than 35-40 degrees! The slide is about a mile long in length and we climbed it with 55 pound packs on our backs! It was hard work, but there was great joy in making it up and reaching the top.

But the joy was about more than simply reaching the top, because if that were the case, there were other, easier routes up the mountain! No, the cost of climbing the Northslide was itself the joy. The getting there itself, the effort itself, the hard work itself, was the joy. A runner knows this well: the joy is in the running itself, not just in finishing the race.

We do know something about cost and joy ... but the costs and joys of discipleship are deeper and higher.

Discipleship is about following, about following a leader, about following Jesus. When we are a disciple it's not about where we want to go or what we want to do, but about where Jesus intends to go and what Jesus intends to do. We must pay the price of humility, of letting someone else take the lead, of setting aside our own plans and desires.

And Jesus may well lead us to places we would never choose to go to ourselves! Jesus may well not lead us up a mountain, but into the valleys, into valleys of pain and struggle and poverty and loneliness, into valleys darkened by the shadow of death. Jesus may ask us to follow him into Haiti or Nicaragua. Jesus may ask us to cook a meal on Kimball Avenue or paint a wall in New Orleans. Jesus may ask us to tutor a child who struggles to learn or to invite into our home a child who has nowhere else to go.

There is a cost in going where we may not have chosen to go, in giving what we might not have expected to give, in taking risks we may never have imagined we would take. But there is joy too! There is the joy that comes with the satisfaction of having done something that matters, of doing something good, but there is more! There is joy in simply being with Jesus, wherever he is, wherever he goes. And there is joy in the places Jesus takes us: the joy of new experiences, new relationships, new blessings. As we give ourselves away, we are not diminished, but enlarged!

So there is more to know about cost and joy, but the costs and joys of discipleship are still deeper and higher.

We are called to be disciples. We are called to follow Jesus, but the way is not always clear. We want to follow, but we cannot always see where he is going. We cannot always hear the sound of his voice.

We will often pay the price, if we choose to follow Jesus, of doubt and uncertainty and ambiguity. We must move ahead boldly even when we are not sure we are moving in the right direction. We may take a wrong turn. We may stray off the path. We may not be sure which path to take. We may even pay the price of losing the way, of losing touch with Jesus, of mistaking the way or setting off on our own when we feel ready to move.

Now let's be clear! We do know enough! Jesus has told us and shown us enough. We know the way. We know enough not to get utterly lost. We know where we are going. But it may take some time to get there, and we may wander off the route many times, and we may have many moments of doubt along the way.

That's the cost of discipleship. And the joy? There is joy in trust, in letting go, in going boldly and confidently in the assurance of God's grace, in walking by faith believing that Jesus will not let us get lost! There is joy in believing, in knowing, that Jesus will lead us home!

But the costs and joys of discipleship are deeper and higher still!

We do not follow Jesus alone: *You call us into your church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship.* We don't follow Jesus one by one, but two by two, ten by ten, dozens by dozens, hundreds by hundreds, church by church. We follow Jesus as a church, as "The Church," as the worldwide body of Christ. We follow alongside fellow disciples, traveling companions, partners.

And that carries a cost. Discipleship is not about rights and privileges and freedoms, not about what we know, what we can do, what we are capable of. It's not about getting there, finding the way, completing the job, climbing the mountain, on our own. We do it together. We go together. We arrive together ... or not at all!

That's what Paul was telling the people of the church in Corinth. You must not exercise your freedom at another's expense! Do not eat, if your eating causes another to sin!

We wait for each other. We look out for our weaker companions. We match our pace to the pace of the group. We look. We listen. We serve. We sacrifice, for the sake of the group as a whole. We get there together or not at all!

And the joy? It is the joy of companionship. of community, of family, the joy of doing together what we cannot do alone, because you cannot be a disciple of Jesus alone!

And there is the joy in that moment when you realize that the one who is weak, the one who needs help to keep going, the one for whom the others will have to wait, the one for whom the others are glad to wait ... is you!

Oh, how deep are the costs and how high are the joys of discipleship! But -- can you believe it? -- the cost and joy of discipleship are even yet deeper and higher!

Sometimes, even when you are following faithfully, you don't get there at all. You follow Jesus up the mountain, but you do not reach the top. You follow Jesus into the jungle, but you never come back out. You follow Jesus toward the land of promise, but you are not permitted to enter. You faithfully commit to the task to which Jesus calls you, but you fail. You follow Jesus into the valley of the shadow of death, and you die.

These may be, these often are, the costs of discipleship. So what is the joy? The joy is in the going itself, not in the getting there! The joy is in the giving itself, not in its results! The joy is in pouring our lives out for the sake of Jesus and those he loves, not in the pride of what the pouring out accomplishes. We leave the getting there, the results, the accomplishment, the completion of the kingdom of God, to Jesus! It is our joy just to be a part of it along the way!

And yet, there will be another joy, too. We will get there! Even if we don't reach the top, we will reach the top! Even if we are lost, we will be found! Even if we lose, we will win! Even if we die, we will live! *For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*

But still, but still, the cost and joy of discipleship are deeper and higher!

Jesus says simply this: *Follow me.* And if you will, you must pay the deepest cost of all ... your self.

You must give up your will, your way, your pride, your dreams, your self, your life. You must give yourself entirely to Jesus. You must join your way entirely to his way. You must join your will entirely to his will. You must wrap your life entirely into his life holding nothing back.

And the joy? I will let you figure that one out!