

“Wanted: Full-time Disciples”

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Text: Luke 14:25-33

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As most of you know, we recently returned from taking Gretchen to college in Ohio. While we were on the campus, we saw lots of students using plastic – some debit cards – some credit cards. According to the American Council on Education, nearly half of freshman college students have credit cards and about a fourth of those cardholders use their credit cards to pay for tuition.

Did you know that at least one in ten consumers have more than ten credit cards in their wallets? The overall average number of credit cards per consumer is four. Approximately half of all credit card holders pay only their minimum monthly payments (sixty percent carry a balance of \$8,000). According to the Federal Reserve, forty percent of American families spend more than they earn. As a nation we are short on saving and long on charging. However, not everyone charges – twenty-three percent of American households have no credit cards at all – no bank card, no retail cards – nothing. Not everyone charges – some people prefer a “pay as you go” approach to life.

Gretchen doesn't have a credit card at Oberlen. As at most campuses, students deposit dollars in their student accounts and then use their “Obie” dollars on campus and some places in town – pay as they go. Pay as you go is not uncommon among persons who lived through the Great Depression. Some people have lived their lives paying cash for food, clothing, cars, and even houses. You may be one of those people. Pay as you go – were more of us better disciplined and not given to instant gratification, we too could pay as we go – we'd probably be better stewards of our resources and more appreciative of what we have.

Pay as you go makes lots of sense – it's an admirable quality – a good goal to have – but then Jesus comes along. Jesus is headed toward Jerusalem, toward the cross. He has tried His best to tell the people who are following Him about the consequences of being His disciple. Jesus realizes they really don't have a clue about what is required and what is ahead of them. So he reveals the price. Like Bob Barker, Jesus shows us the actual price of being a disciple: Hate your family – your first allegiance is to me. Carry the cross – not a little gold cross on a chain but a heavy wooden cross of death. If you want to become a disciple, go out and get yourself killed. Give up your possessions – get rid of everything. If you want to be My disciple, you can't charge it – you gotta pay as you go. You've got to be loyal – committed – all or nothing – part timers need not apply.

You may be aware that September is Church Loyalty Month within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I'm sure there are many pastors today using this text to reinforce the need for the disciplines of the faith – so I could spend the next twelve minutes telling you how important it is that you attend worship, that you participate in fellowship and learning groups, that you give of your financial resources, that you offer your spiritual gifts in service to the church, and that you reach out and share the gospel message with others.

I could do that and I was going to do that – until I remembered the words of Ken Callahan, a pastor and church consultant. Callahan talks in one of his books about the five major motivating factors which draw people to a congregation and help them become workers and leaders and financial givers. Those five are compassion, community, challenge, reasonability, and commitment. All five are present in most individuals – two are more dominant at a given point. All five are present in most congregations – two are more dominant at a given point.

Callahan's research shows that most key leaders in a congregation respond to the motivators of challenge and commitment. However, the vast majority of people in the congregation (aside from leaders) do not respond to motivators of commitment and challenge. Instead they resonate with the motivators of compassion and community. Pastors and leaders of a church transmit their message on the frequency of commitment and challenge – telling the congregation: You need to be more committed! Accept the challenge to do this or do that! But most of the church folk don't hear that message because they are turned in to another frequency – the frequency of compassion and community. Callahan says for a congregation's leadership to be effective in its attempt to involve people in the church, it must start with compassion and community.

Think with me for a moment – doesn't that make sense? During the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, when I make a pledge it is not out of an appeal to duty or commitment, but because of my love for a connection with Blake Reed, a young man from McPherson whom our son Ben assisted at home and school and who was a groomsman in Ben's wedding. Blake has Duchennes Muscular Dystrophy. It's a personal connection that motivates my gift, not a challenge from Jerry Lewis.

You know, when it comes to dating and marriage, a couple usually doesn't begin their relationship with a commitment. They get better acquainted – their feelings grow – then the decision is made – the commitment is expressed – loyalty is pledged – vows are taken. Most married couples don't end the day by telling each other to remember their commitment – wedding vows – they're more likely to embrace and tell of their love for each other.

Scripture doesn't tell us that "we are committed to Christ because He was first committed to us." It says, "We love Him, because He first loved us." The Biblical witness of John 3:16 is not that God was so committed to the world. Rather, it is that God so loved the world, that God gave us the Son.

Callahan says what we may hear from longtime Christians is "what we need is more commitment!" But what originally drew those persons to join a church was a sense of community and compassion. What we need is more compassion. Callahan even suggests that in most congregations, what would be more helpful than Loyalty Sunday would be "Love Sunday!"

What implications do Callahan's words have for us, especially in light of this text from Luke? First, let's be clear, we must never apologize for the need to be challenged – to be committed to Christ. The scripture reading is abundantly clear that nothing must get in the way of our following Christ – our eyes must remain fixed on the cross and nothing else. As Bonhoeffer so eloquently said, "Our hearts have room for one all embracing devotion – we can only cleave to one lord." It is necessary that we take time at the beginning of another fall to remind ourselves of the demands and discipline of faith. Loyalty to Christ is paramount. But what about loyalty to others – in and outside the church? What about that desire for us to find compassion and community here in this place?

In *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*, the author says:

Many very generous Christians find themselves increasingly tired and dispirited, not so much because the work is hard or the success slight, but because they feel isolated, unsupported, and left alone. People who say "I wonder if anyone cares about what I am doing?" are in real spiritual danger. We are able to do many hard things, tolerate many conflicts, overcome many obstacles, and persevere under many pressures, but when we no longer experience ourselves as part of a caring, supportive, praying community, we quickly lose faith. The crises in the lives of many Christians today are closely connected with deep feelings of not belonging.

It is my fervent hope and prayer that First Christian Church is a place where you feel welcomed, cared for, loved, and appreciated – that you feel compassion and a sense of community. I know for many of you that is the case – I hear comments such as, "My Sunday School class has been like my family," "The choir has been like my family," or "I don't know what I would have done without the support of people in that church," or "Church folk were there when I needed them." Comments that reflect not necessarily structure and commitment, but compassion and community and love. I've suggested to you before that for me, the image of the staff on *M.A.S.H.* is a helpful image. At MASH 4077 they had a saying, "Best Care Anywhere." People helping people – people on the front lines giving the best care possible to those who are injured. Because of our loyalty to Christ – our commitment to be the most faithful disciples of Jesus we can be – we must seek to be a MASH unit. We're on the front lines of life. People all around us are hurting – sometimes we ourselves are the ones who are hurting – people outside the walls of our building, people sitting in the same pew with us – we are living in a hurting world. And as another September 11 rolls around, we'll be reminded again of the hurts we've endured.

In yesterday's *Kansas City Star* columnist Bill Tanmeus said: "Shouldn't six years have given us enough time to accommodate ourselves to the losses, to process our grief, to understand the damage done by religion run amok and to rebuild? In theory yes, but the dreadful reality is that it is, in effect, still 9/11 in oh so many ways." People all around us are hurting. Some of those in our midst who are hurting are easy to spot – spirits and souls are bruised – we can see it in their eyes – and some who are hurting try not to show it and don't want to be a burden to others.

I am hopeful we are and can continue to be a place of welcome – a place of healing, compassion, and comfort – a place where, because of our decision to keep our gaze fixed on Jesus Christ, we can be His body – the body of Christ – on earth – offering compassion and a sense of community. Being that community of faith is central as we wrestle as a congregation with questions of property, relocation, addition of staff. Being that kind of faith community is part and parcel of the "Pay as you go" plan of discipleship.

Being the body of Christ is not cheap. Bonhoeffer reminds us that grace is costly because it calls us to follow and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a person his life, and it is grace because it gives a person the only true life. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon Christ too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Above all, it is costly because it cost the life of God's Son and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Grace is not cheap, neither was the cross. Being the church is not cheap – it's costly – the price is love.

O God, renew our loyalty to the church of Jesus Christ by renewing our compassion, our sense of community, our hope, and our love. Amen.

Thanks to Rev. Eric Kutzli for the idea of "pay as you go."