

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Des Moines, Iowa

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Psalm 139:1-18; Luke 14:25-33

“Counting the Costs of the Kingdom”

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We live in a day of viral celebrity. I imagine it depends on how many children you have near you, and what age they are, for you to have an answer to this question: “Who is your favorite YouTuber?” I know my children could tell you the answer to that. My son, Miles, was telling me yesterday, I think it was about someone named Grian, who does animated stuff in Minecraft. YouTube is this amazing platform for viral celebrity and it has permeated our culture. YouTubers are excellent promoters. They have learned what it takes to draw attention to themselves and create followers.

I was watching one. I have shared with some of you. You might know that my son, Liam, has been interested in blacksmithing. So, he and I went to a blacksmithing class when we were in Seattle and then another one here in Des Moines, and we are beginning to learn how to blacksmith together, which is fantastic fun. But there are YouTubers who will teach you blacksmithing, so my favorite YouTuber right now is named Alec Steele, who totally knows how to promote himself and how to create a following. He has over a million followers.

Jesus was not a master promoter, as evidenced by this passage. Jesus’ problem was not what the YouTuber’s problem was, and the YouTubers are trying to create this massive following. Jesus, on the other hand, kept getting more and more people following him, perhaps out of just this viral sensation, this act of wonder of, “Who is this person who is doing these amazing things and saying these incredible things?” And, they wanted to follow along, just to be part of it, perhaps. Jesus needed to clarify for them what it was that he was teaching and what it meant to follow him. There isn’t a YouTuber who is going to make any money by saying, “If you want to subscribe to my channel, go and sell all of your possessions.” But, that is the way Jesus addressed the crowds who were following him.

Now, first, an exegetical note – a note about the language in this passage. I remember when I was younger I was troubled by this passage, because it has some strange language, and if we were to take it literally, it wouldn’t make sense with the rest of Jesus teachings. It wouldn’t make sense that Jesus – the one who has told us to love God and love other people – would tell us if we want to follow him, that we need to hate our parents, and our wives, and our children, and our lives.

John Calvin to the contemporary commentators today are scholars in complete agreement with this. He was not asking us to hate people, particularly not people near us. It was describes as Semitic hyperbole, and we have a form of this in our culture. It may be a little different in tone and tenor than what it was in Jesus day, but I think we can recognize hyperbole – this speaking something larger – making a point by exaggerating. I won’t refer to any particular individuals about this – just this idea – you can imagine that the people who were hearing this were not hearing Jesus tell them to hate people. What they heard was, “If you want to follow me, if you

want to understand what this is, you need to understand that you have to submit everything else to it.”

It wasn't just him being harsh. It was him explaining what the Kingdom of God is. If you want to be in the Kingdom of God – and Jesus was this manifestation of the Kingdom of God, walking around the power of God and the reign of God happening everywhere he went – if you want to be part of this, you can't hold on to your kingdom. You have to let it go. You have to make God's Kingdom first, and you could bring it all into God's Kingdom.

In the Lectionary readings today – we read two of them here, Liam read one earlier and I read this one – a third one is a letter, the letter Philemon. The Apostle Paul wrote to a friend of his – someone who he apparently had converted into Christianity. And, he was writing to this man asking him to change his life.

He said to him, “You owe me – essentially. I have done so much for you, and if there is any accounting needed, charge it to my account, because what I'm going to ask you is – this slave of yours has come to me, and has become a friend and a companion, that you would release him from slavery and accept him as a brother in Christ.

Now, the Apostle Paul wasn't asking this because he was upset with the man. He was asking something – a cost to him – to gain something greater: “Give up your slave, that you can gain something else; that you can gain a life with this brother in Christ.” Following Jesus was going to change this man's life. It was going to upset things. It was going to change things. He was going to be called to look at things differently, to live in a new world; but, it was something better. It was something more abundant.

So, as Jesus was sharing this message with the crowds many fell away, not to be surprised, they came to understand that this wasn't what I was hoping to follow. He turned to his Disciples in another passage in John, and he asked them, “Are you going to turn away also? Are you going to walk away?” And Peter responded to him, “To who else would we go? You have the words of eternal life,”

They saw it, and I just asked this question, “What was Jesus offering that kept people coming back, if he described this life this way? What was he offering that was so good, that people were willing to follow him and turn everything over to God's Lordship?”

The Disciples saw it. They experienced it, and the passage that Liam read today describes it. It is in the Old Testament and I understand that that can be theologically confusing, but it is a description of what it looks like to live in the Kingdom of God.

It is David describing how amazing it is to have this relationship with God the Father and God the Creator. As Liam described it, David is overwhelmed by how amazing it is that God is with him – there is nowhere he can go. “God, you know me completely. Before I was even born you knew me. You know before and behind. You hem me in. If I was to go to the far side of the sea you would be there. If I was to dig a giant pit in the Grand Canyon and sleep there, you would

still be there. There is nowhere I can go away from you. You have made me and you know me, and I am in awe of this.”

David experienced the presence of God all of the time. There was nothing separating him from God’s presence. He turned over his conflicts and his challenges and, as the Psalms describe, there were lots of them. His best friend’s dad threw a spear at him – drove him out of the Kingdom. He had to go to the Philistines, a hated group among the Israelites, and find refuge with them under one of their lords, and then he was kicked out of them when they started fighting with the Israelites, because they were worried he would choose the wrong side. His life was tough, but he kept trusting God, and turning over to God; and, in that serenity and the joy of following God’s leadership, God led him to the throne of Israel, and he was the most celebrated King of the people of Israel.

So, what are the costs of the Kingdom and what is it worth? The cost of the Kingdom is – I remember my dad saying, as a pastor of many years – the cost is everything. It is bringing everything before God, but the benefit is getting it all back ordered in God’s Kingdom. Relationships with others that are ordered by God’s Kingdom, relationships with our work, with our lives, the opportunity to be of service, to be part of something greater than ourselves – that is what we receive back.

So as we start this New Year, let us consider what God invites us to do, and weigh the costs or – the Eifel Tower (Pastor Bill holds up the cover of the bulletin – a picture of the Eifel Tower under construction) would have been much less impressive if it stopped there; that would have been quite a spectacle if they got to this and said, “Well, that is all we can do.” That wouldn’t have been impressive. But Jesus said, count the costs, consider what this is – what is it, what does it mean to be part of this, and recognize that what we receive is so much greater. Amen.