

“Counting and Not Giving Up”
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Today’s two readings possess a common thread of “counting the cost,” and once counted, the hope is that we move ahead to do the hard thing. I assume that St. Paul counted the cost, and he moved ahead when he counted a run-away slave a brother in Christ. Onesimus, the person we meet in today’s first reading, was both; sadly, at the time, his first identity mattered more than his second one. We don’t know exactly what Paul intended for what would later be the undoing of slavery, but he leveraged his good name and his friendship with Philemon toward an undoing. I want to believe that Paul would be very disappointed to discover that 1,700 years later, the great American experiment to create a more perfect union would take 89 years to officially end slavery, and only after a bloody war meant to, in fact, keep slavery intact and expand its acceptance. It is true, as best we know, at least from the writings we now possess, neither Paul or Jesus overtly condemned the practice of slavery. What Jim Wallis calls “America’s original sin” clearly predates America by thousands of years. But many of our ancestors were committed to ending slavery and were motivated by the teachings of Paul and Jesus to take up their crosses—and arms if necessary. And they were willing to face hatred and misunderstanding between their friends and family, even death, in pursuit of a cause worth dying for. Are you? Am I?

We don’t know if Philemon gave his life in order to free another, but several of Jesus’ earliest disciples paid with their lives for being his followers. Legend suggests that Andrew and Simon died on crosses. Bartholomew was flayed alive. James (son of Zebedee) was beheaded, and the other James (son of Alphaeus) was beaten to death. Thomas was run through his stomach with a lance. Matthias was stoned and then beheaded. Matthew was slain by the sword. Thaddeus was shot to death with arrows and Philip was hanged. And Peter, the keeper of the Keys, well, he was crucified upside down. Only John made it through alive, so to speak. He was exiled to Patmos and died under house arrest on a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. One writer I consulted this week put it this way: “Christianity is not a Sunday morning religion. It is a hungering after God to the point of death if need be. It shakes our foundations, topples our priorities, pits us against friend and family, and makes us strangers in this world. We sing, “What A Friend We Have in Jesus,” but we must understand that on many occasions he is not our friend but our adversary.” What do you make of that?

The context for today’s Gospel reading involves a large crowd that was following Jesus. And with large crowds we usually get plenty of motives that come with playing follow the leader. With crowds there follows confusion and uncertainty, which may have motivated Jesus to speak in such shocking terms. Jesus taught that making a commitment says something about what we value, because we attend to what we value, and we carefully attend to the things that we value most.

I stumbled over some interesting numbers this week. A few years back, someone calculated that a typical life span of 70 years is spent by 23 years of sleeping. We will work about 16 years. And we will sit in front of a TV or computer for a total of 8 years, which may be several years too few for us, now that our smart phones have screens large enough to sit in front of.

And eating? Well, how about 6 years of our lives, about the same amount of years that we will travel. And general leisure, which wasn't explained but I hope includes volunteering, the estimate is 4.5 years. We are ill a total of 4 years, and we spend about 2 years dressing ourselves. And then there is this rather interesting category and number: Religion – 0.5 years. According to this survey, we will spend less than 1 percent of our lives on fleshing out our commitment to what we often sing, pray and say is most important to us. About 6 months in a life of 70 years. Interesting.

Today we pause to consider what it is we value most. Jesus' invitation to follow him and to commit to his way of living and loving, dying and rising again requires that we count the cost. And having counted the cost, well, the hope is that we will follow him—and follow each other whenever we are following him.

Several centuries ago in a mountain village in Europe, a wealthy nobleman wondered what legacy he should leave to his townspeople. He decided to build them a church, but no one was permitted to see the plans or the inside of the church until it was finished. At its grand opening, the people gathered and marveled at the beauty of the new church. Everything had been thought of and included; it was a masterpiece. But then someone said, "Wait a minute! Where are the lamps? It is really quite dark in here. How will the church be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some brackets on the walls, and then he gave each family a lamp, which they were to bring with them each time they came to worship. "Each time you are here," he said, "the place where you are seated will be lighted. Each time you are not here, that place will be dark." Now there's a story that doesn't need explained. Right?

It was poet Edward Everett Hale who challenged us with three simple lines: "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will do the something I can do."

Here's the question with which each of us can wrestle; I'll ask it of me, you ask it of you. If every person in my marriage, my family, my friendships, my church, my town, state, nation, country, planet... if *everybody* did just as *I* do, what kind of life, what kind of world would we share? Ask it this way: If *everybody* matched *my* effort, love and commitment, would there be enough lamps? Oh, it is a penetrating question. But wait, there's a follow up question: If I gave just a little more—a little more effort, loved a little more deeply and widely, if I recommitted my life to a cause worth dying for, what light could *we* shine in dark places?

Let us count the cost, and let's not leave anything out. And then let us count the cost of giving up. Amen.