

Luke 14:22-35

The Cost

At this point in Jesus' ministry, he was a success. He started with nothing but a ragtag crew of former fishermen and shepherds, and now he has a hearty group of followers willing to do anything. Even more impressive, the crowds he draws are large and growing. Everywhere Jesus went, great crowds gathered.

Jesus had a winning strategy--make people feel good, heal them, talk about love, leave no one out. Just before he spoke to these crowds today, he gave a noteworthy speech about a giant banquet at which everyone--everyone was invited. Boy, did those crowds love it.

And to be honest, the thought of these large crowds has us modern church leaders a tiny bit envious. After all, that's what we are so often after. Full pews. Great crowds. Disciples willing to do anything for the cause.

I have spent a great deal of time on various church websites lately. Seeing what our colleagues are up to, how they are reopening, how their livestream works. And if there is one thing that binds the Lutherans, the Congregationalists, the Episcopalians, the Evangelicals, it's our want to grow--or, truthfully, not decline.

And we are all trying to make church as easy and accessible as possible. Most of us tell folks to "Come as you are!" "We are a warm and welcoming community!" "Got questions about God, so do we!" Churches everywhere are trying to figure out how to make church less formal, more fun, relatable, easy-going, user-friendly. All with the hope that if we do, we might get bigger crowds. Jesus was after those big crowds too, but after weeks of user-friendly, all are welcome, love your neighbor talk, he reads them the fine print.

Hate your family. Carry the cross. Give up your possessions. How's that for a church growth strategy?

Jesus is telling the crowd the cost of discipleship, the cost of being a true follower, and it's pretty expensive.

Carry the cross, I get. Give up your possessions--difficult, but okay. Hate your family? Hate your mother, father, spouse, children, siblings? That seems extreme.

Now any scholar will tell you that Jesus was using exaggeration, hyperbole, rhetoric to shock the crowd into really listening. Some scholars note that the word we translate to hate didn't mean it in the way we hear it. Instead, a better translation might be "turn away from" or "detach" or "desert".

But, I'm not sure that really softens the blow. Ditch your family? Carry a symbol of torture? Give everything away?

Instead of telling the crowds how appealing life with God is, Jesus is telling them how difficult and unpleasant it will be to live a Christian life. I'm not sure we should lead with that in our membership campaign.

Jesus knows there will be a cost to following him, and those of us eager to do so, better think hard about what we are willing to face.

In fact, at the time of Luke's writing this passage, a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, Christians were facing Jesus' words as reality. Families were being torn apart between the choice of following the empire or living dangerously as Christians. New converts

were being tortured and crucified on the cross. On the run or hiding, you couldn't bring much in the way of personal possessions. Christianity was a dangerous undertaking.

In today's gospel, Jesus isn't being cruel. He's being honest. Truthful with us about where life is to be found and refusing to make Christian living sound easy or simple.

I recently learned the truth behind Jesus' warning.

Last fall, as the pandemic raged and we were keeping safe in our homes, I decided to wade into the world of the social media app Tik Tok. It has nearly 700 million users worldwide. It is the most downloaded app of iPhone users. The average user uses the app for 55 minutes a day. And most striking, 2/3rds of its users are between the ages of 10 and 29.

Tik Tok is a video sharing app. Users utilize music, filters, dance, to make their videos; their tik toks. Videos can only be 60 seconds or less. And most of the videos are fun: dance, humor, satire. But as I was scrolling through, I noticed other tik toks. Videos that were homophobic, racist, degrading to women--hateful, terrible videos rooted in a broken understanding of the Christian faith.

Whether we choose to accept it or not, the reality is that this is how a whole new generation is learning about the world and about Christianity. It's not through good peer-reviewed scholarship or books, not through our well polished sermons, but through 15 second, 30 second videos. And once they are created, posted, they are shared across the world at lightning speed.

Short, accessible, widely seen videos telling these 10-29 year old user a story of the Christian faith that is short sighted, dangerous, wrong. So, I decided--with the help of some Old South Church youth--to make my own Tik Toks; videos that would tell of the progressive Christian faith, of the United Church of Christ, of Old South Church.

After a few weeks of making these simple videos, one took off. I'm not sure why, but in the course of a morning one video about Progressive Faith was seen half a million times. I gained thousands of followers and received hundreds of messages. And with each passing hour, those numbers grew. And I felt hooked. Every day I would make another video, sometimes answering questions users had about how people can be queer and Christian, does hell exist, is it wrong to doubt.

Now, none of these videos would shock you. They weren't controversial by our standards. The values within them are not new to us:

LGBTQ people are beautiful.

Women belong in the pulpit.

God is more grace than judgment.

Climate Change is real and our action is a matter of faith.

Jesus invites all to the Communion table.

We read the bible seriously, not literally.

Black Lives Matter.

You know our values.

Still, the messages that I began to receive were astounding. They were from youth and young adults around the globe who were surprised to hear a church like ours exists, surprised that God would love them. Messages poured in asking for help to find a progressive church like ours, messages from Africa and Eastern Europe, the midwest and even the Boston suburbs. When I couldn't find a church for them, I'd invite them to our livestream. The Children's Christmas Pageant was a huge hit with our Tik Tok visitors.

Quickly I was reminded that our normal is still not the world's normal. This joyful Christian faith that we practice is not mainstream, not understood, not known. And I had fun spreading this message, working with other Tik Tok clergy around the country to find new ways of sharing our old story, connecting with youth who were starving for God's love.

With the good, came the bad. For every humbling comment or message came two others that were less so. Messages warning me that I am (and you are) destined for hell, breaking God's heart, false teaching, a wolf in sheep's clothing. I was told that I had never opened a bible or served a real church. I was called every homophobic expletive I've ever heard. And mostly, those messages didn't hurt me. I have thick skin. What hurt more was the youth, the kids, on Tik Tok who were receiving these messages too.

In December, the messages became more worrisome and uncomfortable. Threats. Terrible accusations. Hateful language. Long tirades sent to my email.

Then, in early January, I woke up and learned that I had been doxxed. Now if don't know what the means, I'm going to tell you and I hope you never have to encounter this word again. To be doxed is publishing or private or identifying information on the internet, typically with malicious intent. Private, personal information such as my home address, those of my loved ones, birthdates, phone numbers, were posted on nightmarish websites. Private, personal information shared on the same website and apps that were being used at the same time to plan the terrorist attack on the Nation's Capitol on January 6. My home internet was hacked, passwords revealed. And our sense of safety was shattered.

And if I'm being completely honest, in that moment, the stakes of this Christian life became way too real. Until then, I had the privilege of living out my discipleship without fear of real threat or harassment. Then, that changed and I became (and somewhat still am) afraid. And fear is a crippling thing. For a few weeks, I hid inside, ignoring texts from friends, fearing even opening my computer. I left Tik Tok, at least for now. Quieted my presence online. And with a lot of love from the staff and my friends, everyday feels better and I feel less afraid and more willing to do this work of proclamation.

Still, there are times I feel frozen in my ability to carry out this Christian work. I now know the cost of proclaiming our joyful, inclusive, welcoming to all faith and its hefty. That's what these costs do, that's why Jesus was raising those dreadful examples. They cause us to think hard about our commitment to discipleship and if we are really willing to claim the Christian life.

Now, to be clear I do not believe that Jesus is asking that we all take on a road that leads to threats and fear. In fact, Jesus doesn't want that for any of us.

Nor do I believe that we must take on a cost to earn God's love or affection or to ensure our place in heaven. That's already taken care of. Instead, this is about the caliber and character of our earthly, Christian lives.

Jesus is asking, rather Jesus is demanding, that we who follow his way be willing to risk. And the risks will be different for all of us. It might be our social standing, our time, our wealth. It might be our sensibilities or our sense of security. If we truly give ourselves over to this discipleship, it will be costly. But if we do, Jesus promises us that we will also find joy and life. Three weeks ago I received an email from a high school student named Lindsay. I have never met Lindsay, but she told me she followed my Tik Tok. She gave me permission to share this with you.

I had been on a mission to find a church and start my faith journey but all churches I visited didn't feel right for me. I felt so hopeless in that search and that I would never find a church that thought in a similar way that I did till I found your account. I had no idea that a church can have the views that yours does. It was all I was waiting for and wanted but I didn't even know it existed. I clicked the link in your bio to find a progressive church near me and the first church that popped up was South Church in Andover. I started attending online Worship in December 2020 and then I started youth groups and even participated in the mission trip. Today, I got confirmed and I couldn't be happier with the church I am at.

"Count the cost," Jesus says. Be sure you're ready for what you're getting yourself into. But if you do, if you follow this more demanding way you might just find the joy of discipleship, the freedom and richness of discipleship; the fullness of life with God.

You can do it, church. You can risk it all for the sake of this costly Christian life. I know you. I know you can. We will do it together.

Amen.