

**ORDINARY TIME TWENTY THIRD SUNDAY YEAR C 2010 HOMILY**  
**(Wisdom 9: 13-18a; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14: 25-33)**

**The Cost of Discipleship: Can We Afford Christ?**

When I was pastor of St. Nicholas Parish in Zanesville before I came to Westerville, I heard an old story about a janitor at the neighboring Catholic church of St. Thomas which was located just a few blocks away. The story goes back to the days when people generally used coal for heating.

One bitterly cold winter Sunday, this janitor was trying to stoke the furnace and he was having some problems with the boiler which was quite old. He came up out of the basement into the church to check on the temperature and there he encountered some ladies who were complaining about the cold in a loud stage whisper. The fellow took as much of this as he could and then, exasperated, he turned around and said to the women: "What do you expect for a dollar a week?"

The janitor was, of course, implying that these parishioners were too niggardly in their support of the parish and, if they had given more, there might be a new boiler. If he had further unpacked what he was saying, he would have to admit that he was challenging them, at least indirectly, to reflect on what their membership in the church was worth to them and what the realistic cost to them should be to make the parish run well and to have things like heat in the winter. In his anger, the janitor was saying more than he knew – but the ladies got the point (even though they might not have liked to hear it).

In today's Gospel from Luke, Jesus is, in effect, asking us this question: "Can you afford to follow me?" To put it another way, Jesus is asking you and me to reflect in a realistic way on what it will cost us to be his authentic disciples. Of course, he is not thinking primarily in financial terms – although that is quite often part of any true commitment. Rather, he is asking us to take a look at the whole picture of our relationship with him – spiritually as well as materially. Are we willing to put Christ first in our lives – no matter what the cost?

Jesus uses a couple of examples in the Gospel to make his point that following him is not a casual undertaking but a very serious one. If someone were contemplating a construction project, would not they sit down and calculate its affordability? And if you were a General facing a battle with an army twice the size of yours, might you not step back and consider whether asking for peace-terms would be the better course than to risk courting disastrous defeat?

On reading this Gospel, I am reminded of another experience I once had in Zanesville when we were planning to paint the outside of the dome of that beautiful St. Nicholas Church there. We were wondering whether we could attach scaffolding to the dome in order to facilitate its painting. So we consulted an engineer. He informed us that the dome would not support the weight of the scaffolding. In fact, he told us that those who had engineered the church when it was built over a century ago, designed it so that its walls

could support the weight of the dome and very little more. There was enough support there, but none to spare. In other words, the parish's ancestors did a great job of planning the design of the church. They knew exactly what they were doing and, because they planned well, they built well and what they built was efficient and lasting as well as beautiful. This is a timely story because this kind of care is precisely what we are taking today in building our new church here at St. Paul's which we intend to be around for generations to come. By the way, we ended up using tall cranes to paint the dome in Zanesville.

In the examples from the Gospel and from the history of the St. Nicholas church building, we can learn the importance of careful planning in our lives. When it comes to our commitment to Christ, it is wise to employ this same careful planning because being his disciple is the most important "project" (so to speak) that we have undertaken in our life. And unlike with a building or a battle (which are one shot deals), it may be advisable to consider frequently – perhaps even daily – whether we can afford the cost of following the Lord.

The famous German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45), who was a young Lutheran Pastor when the Nazis grabbed power in the 1930s, came up against the necessity of calculating the cost of being Christ's disciple. He could have easily fled his native land or perhaps found a way to lay low until Hitler was defeated. But he determined that, in order to be a faithful disciple, he had to be part of the resistance to the Nazis' reign of terror – especially their campaign of anti-Semitism. Bonhoeffer carefully reflected on and planned his participation in the underground movement against Hitler and he even took part in a famous plot to kill the dictator. His cooperation in this undertaking was the fruit of much prayer and spiritual searching. He did not believe in violence; but he concluded that, in the real situation that existed in Germany under the Nazis, the removal of Hitler was a moral imperative. Bonhoeffer had earlier in his life (in 1937) written his classic book which in English is called *The Cost of Discipleship*. And he was himself to pay the highest possible cost of being Jesus' follower because the Nazis hanged him on April 9, 1945 – less than a month before the end of WWII in Europe!

Bonhoeffer once wrote: "Real Christianity means sharing each other's pain." This reminds us that to follow Christ in any age entails caring for him in our neighbor. And this, as we know from experience, will cost us a lot. Let us remember what Jesus says at the end of today's Gospel: "... anyone of you who does not renounce all his/her possessions cannot be my disciple." As we calculate the cost of following Jesus, we Christians are called to put the importance of material goods in perspective by the sincere desire to share them generously.

So can we (you and I) today and everyday prayerfully reflect on what it will cost us each new day to be a disciple of Christ? Can we afford what it takes to follow him today and to care for him today in our brothers and sisters? The cost of authentic discipleship is assuredly quite high. But we also know that it is worth the cost. Jesus himself has shown us in his Resurrection how glorious the pay-off is. And those who have paid this cost in

history – people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer – also inspire us to find a way to afford Christ. Let us remember, too, that another way of approaching this issue is to ask this question: “Can we afford not to follow Christ?” Can we afford not to be his authentic disciples? Could the ladies of St. Thomas long ago really afford not to help to maintain their church building? Can we afford to squander our life on what will lead us away from Christ? So I invite you to rejoice that Christ calls us to true discipleship. By his grace, he will help us to afford him and to pay any cost rather than to be untrue to him.