

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, September 9, 2007, Pentecost 15, dedicated to the teachers of First Church, to Pam Kallner and to Mark S. Williams as they lead us into the future and always to the glory of God!

“Stepping Up With Jesus”
Philemon and Luke 14:25-33

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Welcome back on this “Stepping Up” Sunday! For those who don’t receive email (or have AOL accounts, which have been bouncing back to our church for the last 10 days or more); for those who didn’t get the phone tree message (like me); or the newsletter; or the mailings for church school or for those visiting for the first time - you may not know that today is **Stepping Up Sunday**. In years’ past, we have called this Rally Day. But this year - we are not rallying, we are stepping...up!

For 10 months, we have been reading texts from Luke’s Gospel (promotional advertisement for the Luke/Acts Bible Study!). And today, on this day celebrating our Educational Ministry and Mission and returning to the fall program schedule, we end up “smack dab” in the middle of Luke 14.

After hearing the Gospel of Luke minutes ago, some of you may be wondering why I called this meeting or why we didn’t change the text? Is this a great way to kick-off the new year? My first sermon five weeks ago about Nehemiah and all Jesus can do for us, tells us

to “Hate your mother, father, wife, children, brothers and sisters,” “carry the cross and follow me,” “Give Up **ALL** Your Possessions” just to “be his disciple?” And in his parables, in addition to building towers and laying foundations, he is talking about waging war? Where did “Happy Jesus” go? Today was supposed to be “Happy Jesus” with traveling shoes on! Where did he go and more important - where is he taking us?

Let’s dig in and see what Jesus’ “Road Less Traveled” feels like. What does the Highway to Heaven look like according to St. Luke?

By the middle section of Luke 14, we know Jesus is well on his way to Jerusalem. As he has taught and healed in Galilee, he has gathered a growing group of disciples, followers and groupies. The disciples are serious about the “Jesus way.” The followers are sort of “middle of the road” about the cost of discipleship and the groupies want to catch a glimpse of the next miracle.

It’s sort of like a political campaign. The disciples are the “true believers” in their candidate. They are in this hook, line and sinker. The followers send a few dot.com dollars and show-up at some political rallies once in awhile. The groupies wear T-shirts and cheer when their candidate’s name is mentioned - but they will move on when their “Plan B” starts looking better. A disciple will go all the way with Jesus. A follower will go to the city gate and stop there - knowing the end is in sight. A groupie will yell “*I love you Jesus*” today and “*Crucify him!*” tomorrow.

Jesus wants to know who is really with him as he heads to Jerusalem and his impending death on the cross. But, the folks with their traveling shoes on want to know the nature of this journey to Jerusalem!

Fred Craddock raises these questions on the nature of the Jesus journey:

- **Is this a funeral procession?** *Apparently only Jesus has seriously faced the issue of his death: the twelve (disciples) have not yet grasped it.*
- **Is it a march?** *Very likely some think so, investing a good deal of emotion in imagining the projected clash: Galilee vs. Jerusalem; peasants versus power; laity versus clergy; Jews versus Romans; Jesus versus the establishment.*
- **Is it a parade?** *Obviously the crowd thinks so, oblivious to any conflict, price to pay or cross to bear. Everybody loves a parade - so the crowd swells. (Luke, Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for teaching and Preaching, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1990, p. 181).*

In this context, Jesus begins to speak to the crowd with some almost frightening demands - hate your family and hate your own life. There is no hedging bets or candy-coating. That is what he says. He says "Hate" - which in Greek is "**miseo**" (**mis-eh-o**) - "**to detest**" especially to "**persecute.**" It seems very clear.

The only wiggle room we are given is this: "To hate" is a Semitic expression meaning to "turn away from" or "to detach oneself from." Like threading the eye of the needle, we have a chance to be disciples. I don't know about you, but I don't want to hate my family or myself - not when the body of scriptural evidence calls me to love them and you.

What Jesus **IS** commanding you to do is "think for yourself," to detach from self-defined ways or destructive or hurtful ways of people close to you and follow a savior who is loving, nurturing and caring. Jesus is giving permission to set out on the road with him, which is the road less traveled (Robert Frost's poetic image). Actually, Jesus is calling us to a higher road, a great love and to be distinctive in our choices of following him. He wants us to be disciples - not merely followers or groupies.

What he is commanding is demanding! To **Step Up with Jesus** requires some serious hiking boots - not “flip-flops!” In the parables that follow Jesus infer this question: “*Are you sure you want to do this? Is the price more than you are willing to pay?*”

- The first parable is drawn from rural life and involves building a tower in the vineyard from which the farmer can stand and watch for thieves and foraging animals.
- The second parable pictures the royal house where the great issues of war and peace are settled.

But rich and poor alike, royalty and peasants alike, have essentially the same decision to make when faced with a major expenditure of time, property and life itself - does this cost more than I am willing to pay? The decision is no different when we are faced with the decision for discipleship: the enthusiasm for beginning is there, but am I willing to give the resources needed to carry discipleship through to completion? (Drawn from Craddock’s *Luke* cited earlier, p. 182).

Today, we are “Stepping Up” with Jesus - but Mark, Pam, teachers, students, members and guests - do you know what you are doing? Do you realize what this means? Is it any wonder that by the time Jesus got to Jerusalem, the crowd had thinned out? His demands to us are just that - demanding! Discipleship is demanding! In *The Cost of Discipleship*, (written eight years before his execution by hanging at the hands of the Nazi SS), Dietrich Bonhoeffer: “*When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.*” We have to count the cost!

Dorothee Soelle says it another way. She says that the cost of discipleship can be frightening. In her book, *The Inward Road and the Way Back*, Dorothee Soelle writes:

We are afraid of religion and of the community that goes hand in hand with it. It is difficult to control. We are afraid of the emotions that religion helps articulate. We do not object to emotions so long as they are private and restrained. Nor do we object to a group dynamic that is totally wrapped up in itself. But the kind of religious emotions that are expressed in ways critical to the

world are regarded as dangerous . . . to pray, to experience common aspirations, to share with one another our fears as well as our hopes . . .

We are afraid of the kind of experiences that challenge our sense of security. We are afraid to be shaken and disturbed by such experiences. (Ultimately), we are afraid of religion because we are afraid of the absolute demands religion lays upon us . . . We refuse to recognize any absolute standards in our lives because if we did, life would be unendurable for us (D. Soelle, Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1979, pp. 21-22).

Whether you see the cost as demanding or frightening, I want you to look at your “soles” this morning - both the bottom of your shoes and your internal/eternal souls. Your soles may be worn down. They may have holes in them. They may be brand new because you are starting out for the first time on this journey in this new year of walking with Jesus. However they look, however they feel - welcome to the road.

Jesus calls you to be unafraid. Welcome to the road. Jesus wants you to count the cost of the steps ahead, but he also wants us to experience the fullness of Joy on the road ahead! Welcome to the road. **Let's step up with Jesus today.** It will be an unbelievable journey whose end is our beginning. Amen.