

The Joyful Costly Way

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I.

It was a time when family was everything. It was a time when most people had to struggle to hope for even a little bite of prosperity. It was a time when differing with your neighbors didn't pay. It was a time when differing publicly with the rulers could get you in deep trouble.

Such was the time, a long time ago, when the rabbi Jesus turned to the crowd. What he said to them was something like this: "You cannot be my disciple unless you love me more than you love your father and your mother, your wife and children, your brothers and your sisters. You cannot travel this path unless you love the way more than you love your own life. You cannot be my disciple unless you carry your own cross and follow me."

Haunting words. But what do they mean?

Walking the Christ way can be costly, because love is costly. This kind of love can put us at odds with our loved ones, it can require everything. But the joy is there, the hope is there—the Love is there. And that make it worth everything.

I want to take a moment to share with you a little about **risk benefit** analysis.

There are certain jobs we hold, at certain times of our life, which fail to make a lasting impression on our personalities or agendas for life. So it was that in the spring of 1979, a bearded young man appeared briefly at an insurance company in Philadelphia, to do some temporary work. I do not remember the name of the company. But it was, briefly, a learning opportunity. It was where I learned that whole budgets, millions of dollars, were bet by fine upstanding insurance companies, on the calculation of risk, on actuarial tables-- that is the calculus of how long you and I are going to live. And benefits and costs, rates and rewards, were all worked out, with a nice profit margin, on the careful management of lots of information about what the risks were....

The job I had was not fun; it involved checking long lists of computer printouts. Reams of them. The people at that company seemed well dressed and well-mannered but ill-tempered and of cranky dispositions. I didn't like it there. There were two fine people I worked with: another temporary worker, an older woman from Philly who was a great person, and our supervisor, a young woman I respected deeply who had been a year ahead of me in college- who got me the job. Seeing those two individuals each day was the center of my life. But the rest was for the birds.

I learned a valuable lesson in that place: stay away from places where people dress too well because they must. But it also started a lifetime of reflection on what risks are really worth it, and which ones are worthless. Oh, and a few long-lasting questions, like: “Where does real value lie?”

Christ offers each and every one of us the opportunity to start over again from scratch; to re-calculate what the real risks are, and what is worth living for. Weigh the benefits on a spiritual scale. Consider what sort of life is really worth living. Consider whether life without the Power of justice and love is worth living at all. Work out the risks; calculate the benefits, of walking, not in the way of maximum profit, but in the ways of Love.

Jesus tells his followers that no one can expect to live as a companion on the path he has chosen without working out personally the great cost of the struggle. Even kings, and we might fill in, even insurance companies, figure out whether they have the resources to meet the challenges, the battles in front of them. And if they don't have enough, well, they settle up somehow.

So, if you're going to walk with me, Jesus goes on, you better be ready to lay all of it on the line. It isn't just the messiah who needs to be ready to give up life and face suffering for the sake of what is most dear. If we want to talk about the power of Love, we must be ready to face other kinds of power, and suffer the consequences of standing up to power.

Christ calls us to a way of nonviolent resistance. It is a matter of being ready to embrace suffering, even apparent defeat, in order to transform the world utterly from below, rather than simply rearrange the furniture from on high. We have to be ready to face injustice, if we want to talk about justice. We have to be ready to pay the price of our convictions if we want to go around talking about peace.

Those are the risks we embrace. But what are the benefits? The benefits are absolute wonder, utter love, total peace. The benefits—or let's take a faith word

instead, the *blessings* are a new sense of family with all of humankind: not just Christians if you're Christian; not just Hindus if you're Hindu; not just people in your own family or class, but all of humankind!

The path to get there is fraught with risk. In fact, you might have to give it all away. You might just have to give up life itself. Over the years, more than a few have! So calculate the cost before you go plunging into the waters of real live Christianity—not the pale imitation.

Even those who love each other deeply must deal with the risk of conflict, when it comes to matters of the conscience, and of the heart. Wendell Berry, a remarkable poet, remembers difficult disagreement with his father during the Vietnam war, as his father was dying. The poem is entitled:

In Extremis

--I

I was at home alone. He came
to fight, as I had known he would.
The war in Vietnam was on;
I'd spoken out, opposing it--
and so, I thought, embarrassed him.

Not because he loved the war.
He feared for me, or for himself
in me. Fear angered him. He was
my enemy; his mind was made
up like a fist. He sat erect
on the chair's edge as on a horse,
would not take off his coat.
That was his way. My house was not
a house in which he would consent
to make himself at home that day.

The argument was hard and hot.
Tempered alike, we each knew where
the other's hide was tenderest.
We went past reason and past sense
by way of any eloquence
that hurt. He leaned. I saw the brown

spot in the blue of his right eye.
Forefinger hooking through the air,
he said I had been led astray,
beguiled, by he knew who, by God!

And was I then to be his boy
forever? Or his equal? Or
his foe? His equal and his foe?
By grace (I think it must have been
by grace) I told him what I knew:
"Do you know who has been, by God,
the truest teacher in my life
from the beginning until now?"

"*Who*, by God"

"*You*, by God!"

He wept and said, "By God, I'm proud."*

Sometimes to do justice to those who have taught us well, taught us all we know, we must step into places they have not been. Sometimes, to live out the love we have received from them, we must offer it to others, whom they cannot bear to love. Sometimes, to follow Jesus, we must dare to live up to the particular challenges entrusted to us, in our moment, in our situation, challenges that have been placed in the hands of none other.

Here at Emmanuel Friedens Church, we have chosen to stake our faith on a particular location and a particular calling as a church. Yesterday I was driving around town, showing my sister Alice and my brother in law Raju the city of Schenectady. As we drove past Emmanuel Friedens Church, I realized afresh: our location is on the edge of several worlds, at the intersection of struggle and prosperity, of privilege and privation. Our calling is to open the doors to the church, to those on all different sides of these sometimes-conflicting worlds, to create a place of meeting, of meaning, of justice and love, where humanity can gather in the cause of Love. This is amazing work, an amazing opportunity. It is a joyful way—but it is also a way that can be personally and institutionally costly.

Together, we follow Christ...we follow the one who lets us know that it may cost a lot, may cost us everything. Jesus Christ invites us all to walk in the risky paths

of love. The benefits are worth the risks, however foolish and invisible they may sometimes seem.

Come to the table, and taste the grace and love of God.

***The above poem was quoted without asking W. Berry's permission, for the purpose of one sermon only and is only a partial quotation of a wonderful series of poems about his father printed in *Entries*, copyright 1994. Buy the book and read the whole thing!**