

“FEASIBILITY STUDY”

A Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 4, 2016

Text: Luke 14:25-33

My task this morning is basically to build a bridge from the gospel reading to the communion table.

If you heard even half of what Jesus said in today’s reading, you may be thinking twice about acting like one of Jesus’ disciples by coming to the communion table. You could be wondering whether you deserve to think of yourself as a follower of Jesus.

I, on the other hand, am quite sure you are on solid ground considering yourself a disciple of Jesus, and that you are welcome at his table. But I need to convince you.

You may be taking seriously what Jesus said: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

On the one hand, I do want you to take these words seriously. If the early Christians were going to forget any of his words to make their lives easier, these would have been the first to go. Instead, they held on to them and passed them on to us.

(At least you can be grateful that the committee which picks the readings snipped off verse 34 from the end of this reading. Next week we will resume our reading of Luke with chapter 15 which is full of good news.

Verse 34 of chapter 14 goes like this: “Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” What a thunderbolt, at the end of a grim reading. Just as well they left it off!

As I said, it is my responsibility to get you comfortable with coming to the Lord’s table this

morning. Right now, you are wondering if you are salt that has lost its taste because you do not make anything like the sacrifices Jesus seems to expect of his disciples.

The contradiction you may be feeling now stems from an apparent contradiction in Jesus himself. It bothered people then, and it bothers us today. Jesus was holy. But Jesus was a friend not of the “good” people but of sinners. Jesus’ standard for people was higher than anyone else’s. Yet Jesus lived and died for sinners.

Here in the middle of Luke this is getting to be a very painful dilemma. It will be resolved in Luke 15, the story of the Prodigal Son, but we don’t know that yet. We only know that Jesus has raised the bar for discipleship way beyond our reach.

Why?

In order to provoke us into doing a feasibility study. A new one.

The Pharisees had done feasibility studies. They practiced a high sort of virtue which was based on the word of God. Holiness was feasible. Cost high, chance of success reasonable, potential reward extremely high: Go for it!

Sinners such as Jesus associated with had also done informal feasibility studies. They had decided that holiness was not an option. Cost too high, chance of failure too high, forget about it.

You yourself have done feasibility studies time after time, with a mixture of results which I can only guess about. Is it worth being a Christian? Is being a “good person” worth the cost? Perhaps you have decided

not to be perfect in every respect, because the cost of being perfect in every way is too high?

You do “feasibility studies” all the time, not just with regard to the faith. You try to be objective and rational in looking at the risks and benefits of doing certain things, you check to see whether you have the resources of time and energy and enthusiasm, etc.

So, when Jesus tells you to check whether you have what it takes to be his disciple, you know what he’s asking you to do. He only wants you to avoid embarrassment and defeat, which you also want to avoid, so he’s giving sound advice.

But. The big question is, how can it possibly be feasible to be his disciple, if these are the resources required to do it? Some kind of iron will, eagerness for suffering, willingness to break all ties, and so forth?

Time for me to stop making this worse, and start building you a bridge.

First, Jesus demands nothing of us that the law of God did not always require in the first place: To love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus merely points out the hypocrisy of people who are cutting corners, putting excellent things like family and life and possessions where God belongs in our heart. And to love our neighbor as ourselves does not give space for the kind of favoritism which is our way of life. Jesus makes God’s commandments clear, because Jesus knows what God was after, to the end that God’s creation might know perfect peace, with all people loving and serving one another out of love for God. So Jesus is asking nothing new of us, he is just revealing what God has always asked for from us—everything. Jesus humbles us, and asks us to quit trying to fake obedience to God’s commandments. No fakery, only the truth will do with Jesus.

But then comes the good part! Jesus goes on to offer us, through the forgiveness of our sins, the full and

complete, unqualified love of God which is able to restore self-oriented people to a kingdom which begins here and now to fulfill God’s desire for all of us.

That story is best told through the parable about two disappointing brothers, neither of which knew the love of their father until one of them became an outrageous sinner, realized it, and went home. Then and only then did a new regime begin on that Galilean farm, in which the one son lived to love and serve the one who had given him everything from the beginning!

Here, in this reading, we hear mostly just the unqualified demand of God as Jesus spells out what it will cost us to become his disciples. But there is a clue. Jesus says of the king who has only 10,000 troops—that when he realizes he is going to lose the war he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. That’s us!

So, do your feasibility study. Do you love God with all your heart, soul, etc., more than you love anything in the world? I’ll bet not. Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Is the love of God more precious to you than anything? Are you willing to give your all for others, suffer what may come? Probably not.

My advice: send a delegation and ask for the terms of peace.

I’ll save you the trouble. God has sent a delegation—Jesus—with the terms of peace. “Come to me, and I will give you rest.”

Come to the altar not to prove you are a good person, but as one who is accepting the terms of peace which God has sent us: “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved.” That’s all.

The same terms of peace are offered to all. If people would like to make themselves perfect without Jesus, he’s not going to stop them. But he strongly suggests we accept the peace, so the war can end and we can begin to serve God with all that we are

and all that we have. Not perfectly, but under the terms of peace, you and I begin to fill the world with the love of the Creator. So that, as Moses said to the children of Israel, “you may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you.”

Amen.

