***“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….Costly” (so who pays?)***

***Jeremiah 18:1-11 Luke 14:25-33 Trumbull Congregational Church, Trumbull, CT***

***September 4, 2022 Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, guest preacher***

Today is the final message on the theme *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….”* Copies of these messages are in the rear of the church and on the church website. I want to thank the Rev. Tim Hare, pastor of this church, for the opportunity to preach on four successive Sundays, and all of you who have followed this series in-person or on-line or through the website.

Today’s message is *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is…Costly” (so who pays?)* These nine verses from the Gospel of Luke, buttressed by the prophet Jeremiah, shake the foundations of anyone who is bold enough to say, *“I am a Christian.”*

Ever hear of “bait and switch?” If not, I’m confident you’ve experienced it. We’re currently helping one of our sons find an apartment in preparation for new employment. Let’s just say the website pictures don’t always match the in-person reality. But the helpful sales agent says, *“There might be another apartment in our listing. It DOES cost a little more but…..”* I see.

The question posed by these scriptures is whether the Church practices this gimmick. Do we seek to modify or minimize the claims of Christ in order to get people in the pews? Jeremiah and Jesus talk of a God who is serious about how we follow. Jeremiah tells us that God is willing to remake us, like the potter at the wheel, to get the imperfections out. Some of you will know the old hymn. Sing it if you do:

*“Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!*

*Thou art the potter, I am the clay.*

*Mold me and make me after thy will,*

*While I am waiting, yielded and still.”*

**The United Methodist Hymnal, 1989, #382**

And in nine short verses, Jesus reminds us that we need to love him before our families, count the cost of following him, and give up all our possessions to follow him! As Phil Rizzuto, the late Yankee Hall of Fame shortstop turned broadcast announcer used to say, *“Holy cow!”* Who can possibly do that?

Before we try to answer that question, let’s face the reality that some of us don’t want to answer it. We don’t like a God who demands much. We ourselves are beleaguered – through life’s adversities, through illness, through anxiety about many things – and what we want is comfort. Certainly Jesus is not without comfort, as a full reading of his ministry – and even the glimpses of it in this sermon series – makes clear. But that is not all there is to it. When I asked you **last** week to invite someone to worship **this** week, one of the things I said you didn’t have to do was to explain the Westminster Catechism. But since that catechism is part of your Reformed church heritage as Congregationalists, it is good to remember its first article: *“What is the chief purpose of human life? To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”* Too often our unbridled desire for comfort turns this on its head so that our response, paraphrasing Leander Keck of Yale Divinity School, might be that **God’s** chief end is to glorify **us** and be useful to us indefinitely.

This Gospel text turns up every three years if you follow the lectionary. The lectionary is a cycle of Sunday readings used by many churches. I once mentioned to a colleague that I was going to preach on it that week and they said they never had. *“Too hard,*” they confessed. I get it. Who wants to be told that to follow this guy Jesus you have to “hate” your family….calculate carefully….give up your possessions?

While we’re hearing this teaching in the context of **our** journey, we also need to remember the context of **Jesus’** journey. Jesus gives us this teaching as he is headed toward his death on the cross. As early as Chapter 9 Luke tells us that Jesus “set his face toward Jerusalem.” Jesus is on a one-way trip to Golgotha—“Skull Hill”—and its grim cross.

So when Luke tells us in verse 25 that “large crowds” are following Jesus, we can guess not all are doing so for the right reason. Maybe he’ll be a political Messiah. Maybe he’ll overthrow Caesar. Maybe they like his stories. Maybe it’s just cool to be with someone so popular. The bigger the crowds, the more likely Jesus is being misunderstood. So he uses strong, shocking language—about hating family, counting the cost, giving up your stuff—to declare that his ministry is about the sacrificial love of God and that his disciples are to love this God above all else.

What about that word “hate?” It was a forbidden word when I grew up and therefore forbidden when I raised my sons. Yet here Jesus uses it, so it’s worth a closer look. In the original Biblical Greek the word is “miseo,” which means to “love less.” So we are to “love less” our family and our stuff than our Lord God.

Cookies, too. We are to love cookies less than God, which is no small thing if you are four years old and love cookies. When I grew up our next-door neighbors were “Aunt Dulcie and Uncle Lee.” They were the closest thing to blood relatives without the DNA. I was a social and precocious preschooler, so my mother and Aunt Dulcie made a deal: I could stop by Aunt Dulcie’s any time I wanted. If it was not a good time, Aunt Dulcie would say so and I would go home. It if was okay for me to stay, I could.

So one day my four-year-old self went to see Aunt Dulcie. (By the way, those of you with four-year-old children or grandchildren please note that, from a child development viewpoint, four is a very spiritual age. After worship I can tell you two quick stories about spiritual insights of my two sons at age 4.) When I arrived at Aunt Dulcie’s she was baking cookies. I love**d** cookies. Okay, I **love** cookies. She let me stay. I asked her why she was baking cookies. She answered that Uncle Lee loved cookies. I thought for a moment and then said, *“Uncle Lee should love God more than cookies.”*

What is it that we are to love less than God?

Isn’t that always where it gets dicey? What are we going to love less? What’s it gonna cost? What are God’s terms for this transaction of love? Everything. It costs us everything: our life, our possessions, our preoccupations and our prejudices. No negotiation. As I often remark, *“If it was easy to be a Christian, everyone would do it.”*

My mother – the same mother that told me the story of Aunt Dulcie – died on a Sunday, a decade ago this coming Sunday. Not knowing she was about to die, Carol and I left her with my dad in Maryland and drove in the early morning so that I could be at my brand new church on Rally Day, the day Sunday School and the fall program season begins. I said nothing of my loss that morning and later people wondered how I did it. Please know that I claim no special virtue. I believe I was able to do it because God equips those whom God calls; because my mother – a lifelong lay leader in the church –would have expected no less from me; because I knew God was with me and because I didn’t want to rain on my new church’s special day.

But I hear a voice, if not from you then from the antagonist in my mind that says *“But wait, pastor, I thought you told us that God’s love was unconditional. That God loves us no matter what. That “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Indeed I did.

The subtitle of this sermon *“Summertime, and the Livin’ is Costly”* is the question, *“So who pays?”* Traditional Christian faith teaches that Christ paid it all on the cross. We are never to discount that redemptive power of evangelical theology. Whatever the consequences of the disobedient, discordant and destructive aspects of our lives, God does not stop loving us.

That is not the issue. The issue is this: having been loved unconditionally by God, what are you and I going to do about it?

Some will know the name of C.S. Lewis, a contemporary of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of Lord of the Rings. Lewis was an English agnostic-turned-Christian who wrote much to explain Christianity, including Mere Christianity and The Screwtape Letters. He had this to say about what we look for in Christianity and the cost of following it: *“Foolish preachers, by always telling you how much Christianity will help you and how good it is for society, have actually led you to forget that Christianity is not a patent medicine. If Christianity is untrue, then no honest person will want to believe it, however helpful it might be; if it is true, every honest person will want to believe it, even if it gives….no help at all.”* (“Man or Rabbit” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics,* Eerdmans, 1970, p. 108)

This, then, is what it means to count the cost. Because *“Jesus has paid it all,”* as the old bumper sticker says, we are never the same. That means sacrifice for others and service, both through the Church and those networks and organizations committed to serving others. Find a hurt and heal it. *“Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”* When your pastor asks you to serve this fall, shelve the excuses and look instead for God’s leading in the invitation. Embrace the truth of the faith that you will be equipped for the call of ministry because God does, indeed, equip the called. After all:

*“Have thine own way, Lord! Have thine own way!*

*Thou art the potter, I am the clay.*

*Mold me and make me after thy will,*

*While I am waiting, yielded and still.”*