

# Knowing Your Limits

A sermon by The Rev. Philip A. Rodgers presented September 4th, 2016,  
at Trinity United Church in Malton, related to Luke 14:25-33

Who are we without our stuff? You know what I mean – the stuff we have to have around us in order to feel content and good about ourselves? You know, I just don't feel right when my car is in for an overnight service. And the feeling persists until I get my car back. And let's not think about having our smart phones taken from us.

As Canadians we are citizens of consumption, mavens of materiality. We are consumers more often than we are voters. It now seems to be part of our culture. Our patterns of consumption define us, and project who we are. Some of us like to project success, and others of us like to project social responsibility with what we have purchased. We are PCs or Macs; Blackberries, Palms or iPhones; fair trade or free trade. We are Mazda, Volkswagen or Ford car owners; we are supporting breast cancer research as we buy pink or AIDS research as we buy red. We know how cool we are based on whether we choose Google, Safari, or Explorer to surf the web. We stick to one preferred airline, as do those WestJet customers who are proud to fly like they were family.

I'm not saying I am any different. I have my brand identification down to a science. I can justify my choice of big box stores. I know why I use the cable TV provider I do. I even know which fast food chain I would rather eat at. I buy as well as the next person. I just wonder who it is we are without everything we value and are so familiar with.

This issue is raised by the passage from the Gospel of Luke: who are these people without their familiar world, all neat and tidy and smug, all so wrapped up in their social networks and family ties? I find myself having an intercultural encounter with this text, written in a time when family/tribal affiliation was everything. Everyone was "son of" or "daughter of." Entire families converted, or didn't. Families provided access, security, inheritance rights, a way to make a living. The text is hyperbolic, but it gets the point across, that discipleship comes first, before family, before life, and before your stuff.

Jesus does happen to have a strategic planning moment. Could someone go to war without figuring out how likely it would be to win that war? One cannot enter into fairly pivotal ventures without planning ahead, thinking it all the way through.

I recall attending the weekly Keady Market and Cattle Auction with my wife, Joy. Joy was anxious to just browse but I was drawn to the Auction circle. I stood at a rail and just watched. The guy next to me, noticing my interest and that I was a novice in that crowd said, "Now listen, whatever you do, don't scratch your nose at the wrong time, mister!" Later he told me, "Never forget to remember this: Any time you go to an auction sale, whether it is for a cow, a horse or whatever else it is for, always make sure that you know your upper limit price." I've attended auctions of different types in my lifetime, and I must confess that I try to keep my hands in my pockets as much as possible. I find myself thinking, "One suspect move can get you in a lot of trouble!" The great danger for many of us is that we walk into life with Jesus with hands in our pockets and our upper limit set too low.

For a time I served on The Toronto Conference Interview Committee interviewing, screening candidates who were presenting themselves for ordained ministry in the United Church. It was made clear from the beginning that the interview team was asking the candidate to face the real possibility of giving it all up. Nothing is beyond the realm of possibility, and you may be required to respond to challenges of serving in remote rural corners of the country, perhaps in poverty stricken inner city

small churches, to do mission work in conflict zones; plucked from the cozy and heady confines of seminary, and thrown into leadership roles in advocacy for justice.

The passage states: "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Seriously, Jesus? Yes, seriously. Because following Jesus is serious business. Jesus says here, you cannot set low limits with me. Your calling as my disciple is to a life of unconditional obedience where the price is very high. Secondly, Jesus says, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple." Many in the crowd that followed Jesus had been looking forward to the dawning of a new day and now it looked as though it was here. The Kingdom of heaven was at hand, Christ had said as He opened His ministry on earth. And some who heard wrongly assumed that to mean that an age of victory over Rome's occupying forces was just around the corner and that peace, and prosperity would soon be theirs at no personal sacrifice. Indeed, some Christians still imagine this when they first start to follow Christ.

We do well to remember the words of then General, later President, Dwight Eisenhower when he addressed the troops on the evening of the D-Day operation in World War II: "There will be," Eisenhower said, "no victories at bargain basement prices!" He was right. There never are.

Jesus is saying, "If you are looking for a cheap ticket to glory, you are not going to find it with me. The life of my disciple is a life of suffering and difficulty. If you come expecting a free trip along easy street, you will soon go away disappointed."

Thomas Æ Kempis in his *Imitation of Christ* writes that "Many come following Jesus who love his heavenly kingdom but few come looking forward to suffering. Many admire His miracles but few follow Him in humiliation to the cross." And that is the truth Jesus wanted to convey that day, and this day, to His followers. Discipleship is a demanding thing.

The question is, as it always seems to be: what will be our personal response in exchange for so great a love as His. What will we give? For you see, two thousand years or so after He lived on earth there is still something exciting and magnetic about this Jesus of Nazareth that draws people to Him. It must be the power of God behind His word, and the authority with which He calls us to serve Him even now. Following Jesus is not an easy thing, but His word is still the best news this world has ever heard for bad times or good, and that is what you and I are called to remember together. Discipleship is a demanding thing. Discipleship is a delightful thing, and discipleship is a determined thing. If you would follow Him, come with all you are and leave all your stuff behind.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, our Heavenly Father, we come to you in Jesus name. Help us to leave our stuff behind. Amen.