

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST  
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON  
THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP  
Matthew 16: 21-27  
August 28, 2011  
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

The disciples had mistaken ideas about where Jesus was going. They could not imagine him being arrested, abused, and crucified. They were extremely confused about his mission. And they certainly did not expect that following him would lead them to make similar sacrifices for the kingdom of God.

There are some people today, who see Jesus as the source of their blessings and rewards. But they cannot embrace the idea of Jesus calling upon them to make sacrifices and to suffer in his name. It is amazing how contradictory the different views of Jesus can be. Today the most frequent question about anything is, **“What’s in it for me?”** How are we to understand what it means to follow Jesus?

America has long been called **“the land of opportunity.”** We are told that in this country one can become whatever one wants to become. It’s been said that **“Any child born in America can grow up to be President.”** The clear message is that hard work and honest effort will be rewarded. Often the more subtle message is that rewards are the only reason for hard work and honest effort. The reward motive is securely rooted in our national psyche.

The reward motive and fear undoubtedly attract more people to religion than anything else. Consider the appeal of avoiding hell and being assured of heaven. It wouldn’t be the most difficult thing to sell, would it? Consider the appeal of the **“health and wealth gospel.”** Many media evangelists do not hesitate to appeal directly to the poor and the sick, not to mention the greedy, with bold assurances that they will receive precisely what they want. But there is something inconsistent, if not fraudulent, in inviting people to follow the loving and suffering Savior for what they can get out of it.

Sometimes members of the Christian community inadvertently feed the expectation of rewards with their personal testimonies and stories. Lewis Smedes,

of Fuller Seminary in California, has written about his own reservations about this practice. **“My problem was,”** he wrote, **“touting miraculous healings as signals of God’s power and God’s desire to heal our suffering in a world chock-full of suffering that never comes close to getting healed. It was a feeling I could not shake . . . about the fittingness, even the decency, of celebrating far and wide the miraculous healing of a relatively few ailments within a world endemically infected by enormous, intractable, unalleviated suffering. It felt to me like proclaiming that God is alive and well . . . because you survived an airplane crash in which everyone else perished. . . . I think we should see miraculous healings not as a way of solving human suffering, but as whimsical signals - - - not made too much of, but still signals - - - that God is alive, that Christ is Lord, and that suffering is not the last word about the human condition.”** I submit to you this morning that these remarks deserve careful and thoughtful consideration.

From the beginning, Jesus’ way of recruiting followers was very simple. He walked along the seashore and called fishermen to follow him, and they did. Was Jesus that mesmerizing? It seems likely that they knew something about Jesus. He had generated a lot of interest in Galilee. Perhaps they had heard him teaching and seen him healing. Some thought he was beginning a grassroots revolution to rid the country of Roman dominance. To join him might mean helping restore the nation of Israel to its once proud status in the world. It was not what Jesus said, but what they heard that made them such enthusiastic followers. Their eyes were full of stars, these simple fishermen, and their hearts were full of dreams. They had every reason to follow him, including both God and country. They didn’t even ask about rewards, they were so certain the rewards would come. It is obvious at the end that they had not anticipated his death, much less his simple acquiescence and acceptance of it. Whatever rewards they were expecting, they were utterly disappointed. It took the resurrection, the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, and Pentecost to begin to set them straight.

We tend to hear what we want to hear. Jesus had done the best he could to prepare the disciples for what was coming. When Jesus began to talk to them about it, Peter took him aside and said such things would never happen. Jesus responded angrily, and said Peter was not on the side of God. This led to some of Jesus’ most memorable and important words, both for the disciples and for us. He explained what following him would mean. His words were clear enough for anyone to understand. Deny yourselves. Take up your crosses and follow me. Give away your life for my sake, and find true life in God. They could not really

hear it, because they could not believe it. The question is, are we really any different?

We redeem the reward motive by our own unqualified commitment to Jesus Christ. We are to come to him primarily because of his unique and compelling worth. Christ is not a deal-maker; neither does he entice us. He invites us to become a part of his mission, not for our own self-aggrandizement, but to help him realize God's purposes in the world. We are committed to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Any **"rewards"** come as a by-product of this commitment.

Love does not always have a happier-ever-after ending. In our idealism regarding romantic love, we tend to think that nothing bad can come from love. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing involves as much risk as love. We give our hearts so readily, and do not consider the danger involved. There is no pain to compare with a broken heart. We can survive any other pain more easily. Even at its best, the way of loving has its misfortunes and set-backs. True love endures, in spite of everything. In the end, the reward of love is the fulfillment we find in giving ourselves away. Loving becomes its own reward.

Jesus never promised happiness, but he had a lot to say about it. Happy are the poor in spirit. Happy are the sorrowing. Happy are the meek, the humbly trusting. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for goodness. Happy are those who show mercy. Happy are the pure in heart. Happy are the peacemakers. Happy are those who suffer for goodness. Do any of us really need more rewards than these?

It is extremely significant that those who live the most sacrificial lives are the first to say it was no sacrifice. It is evident in our church through the ministry of TLC, led by Monica Johnson. And who has not received a card from Phyllis Blecha? Sacrifice as an expression of love is vastly different from a heavy penalty that must be paid. Love is a powerful motivator. All true lovers know that love requires sacrifices, but that the sacrifices of love are gladly made. And the sacrifice of love is its own reward.

As followers of Jesus we will encounter an unavoidable cost of discipleship. We are called to give ourselves as **"living sacrifices,"** not conformed to the values of the world, but transformed by the power of God. If you are willing to pay that cost in following the Suffering Servant, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church where you can follow in the Christ-like way.