

We know that everything *has a cost and someone must pay the price!* And we have actually gotten quite good at finding bargains, comparing prices, substituting generics for brand name products, all for the sake of not paying more than we have to – but then we complain when the quality is not there. We seem to want to have it both ways. We want full service but at cut rate costs.

Many pursue a spiritual journey in the same way, often demanding everything from God but unwilling to assuming any of the cost. So many seek a "perfect religion" that gives everything but asks nothing; that promises the moon but offers no realistic way of getting there. Dreams are easy, until it comes to cost.

Such thinking reveals itself in some who expect a building to be married in, but only if someone else builds it. It is like those who demand a full service program for children and youth in a congregation but never pray or worship with those same children. Is that any different than someone who never studies but feels they deserve a diploma. Or someone who refuses to learn a skill or trade but expects a guaranteed job for life?

It is no different than in Jesus' day when he was surrounded by curious watchers and lukewarm followers who were offended at his talk of the "great costs" of discipleship. There were two camps, as there are still today. One group felt they had paid their dues and didn't feel any extra burdens on them were fair. The other group either had no way to pay or wanted a free ride.

Jesus had a simple message which was easily misunderstood. He said first that that becoming a disciple had no cost to us – he would pay the price. But discipleship itself would involve a tremendous cost of loving sacrifice and surrender. In other words love pays the price, but a labor of love is the response.

Jesus has brought to the world everything anyone could have ever asked for: the defeat of death, adoption into God's family, and lives of faith, hope, and peace. He paid the price to make that happen. He lived a life of complete servant love. He embraced the death from which none of us can escape. And he destroyed the stranglehold of death with his miracle called Easter. The price was beyond comprehension, and then he offered everything to us as a free gift of love. There is no cost for us to embrace the power of grace.

Yet that is not where the story ends. And that was the point of the conversation recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Discipleship is free, but to be a disciple is not to be lazy, and our response certainly has a price. The servant love Jesus encourages in each of our lives is not what earns the gift of faith, but is the effort that becomes a labor of love, gift so that our living bears the fruit of its potential.

A disciple is one who literally "follows his or her master." It is the discipline of walking in the same footsteps that Jesus has walked in for us. The gift of

“Church” (the body of Christ on earth) is freely given at no cost on our part, but with that as with any privilege it comes with responsibility.

It is like becoming a parent, which calls for incredible sacrifices in protecting, nurturing and helping a child grow into a responsible adult.

It is like finding the love of your life and becoming one in marriage. There is no cost for that, but without the price of a complete surrender of all that I am for another, there can never truly be the “oneness” of marriage.

It is like the chores and responsibilities of each for a family or congregation to function – those aren’t necessary to be included, but essential for a family or congregation to be healthy and grow.

So what is the cost to follow Jesus? Who will pay what is needed for me to be a disciple and a member of his body? Are there dues? Must we tithe? What must we do to be part of the kingdom???

GRACE means there is NO COST to belong! There is NO price that we must pay or actions to be followed to be forgiven or loved. And yet, as disciples there is *response* that would seem to naturally flow.

Like marriage, discipleship means not only to receive BUT also to give. And so we forgive as we have been forgiven. We love as we have been loved. We serve as we have been served. None of this earns anything more for us, but it shows our joy of God’s blessing and acknowledges the price paid on our behalf.

And, as Jesus said at the last supper, “if I your Lord and Master have washed your feet ... how can you do any less for someone else?”

The letter to Philemon is a beautiful example of how this works. Onesimus was a slave in the household of Philemon (a Christian.) Onesimus ran away, bumped into St. Paul, and also became a Christian. Paul encouraged Onesimus to return to his former master, as a powerful witness of the freedom now his.

No one would call this “FAIR.” What a cost had been exerted for him to escape and then to willingly surrender that freedom as a gift to his former master? And yet, what a gift that became when he returned with this letter. What a chance for both to grow as disciples as each were called to surrender for each other.

Both the servant and master, both Onesimus and Philemon would become gifts to the other, as both had the opportunity now to serve each other as the brothers in Christ that had come to them as God’s gift of love.

What an example and light to the world this mixed up relationship would become! For just as Christ sacrificed his freedom on the cross for us, Onesimus now would respond by giving his greatest gift back to Philemon as a sacrifice of servant love. And Philemon would be asked to respond by welcoming Onesimus

as a brother in faith. Can you imagine how those relationships changed, and what a powerful witness that must have been in their little community?

Every biography of St. Francis has a similar story about a prayerful conversation between St. Francis and God. After his conversion to the Christian faith, Francis asked God, "How much more must I do?" As the story goes, God asked "What is it that you don't want to do? And Francis said, "I will do anything for you, but I could never touch a leper!" God responded: "Well then, the only thing you need do is find a leper and embrace him as your brother!"

Francis wrestled with this, prayed intensely to God, and finally asked if there was not another way. God was silent, and Francis finally he decided that if this was Christ's only request, he would do it. He found and embraced a leper and was shocked to discover that the leper was Jesus himself!

What is cost to become Christian? Nothing! Jesus paid price.

What is cost to "join" the Church? Nothing, for we are all nothing but runaway all runaway slaves who' have come back home.

What is the cost of discipleship? Ah...that is a different story and the point of Jesus' words today.

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(extra material for another day)

Chris and I visited an old museum full of steam engines. He remarked that Labor Day was created to celebrate the hard work of the railroad workers of the 19th century. It was recognized in 1894 following a bloody railroad strike, in which many died at the hands of the military and US Marshalls. Chris commented that he felt it so fitting that he and I visited a museum in which we could see first hand the result of (as Chris said) the “blood, sweat, and tears” of those workers over 100 years ago.

His comment remembering the losses of life to build the trains, lay the tracks, and suffer during the conflict of a great train strike was to let that be a Labor Day reminder of a greater labor of sacrifice – in the love of Jesus Christ for you and me. A God who served rather than demanded service! What moved me most by Chris’s sermon was his emphasis on servant love. That our “labor” as Christians is to wash feet, prepare the table, and invite guests.

He is right. Labor Day is a national holiday, but for Christians, our “labor” is always loving service, and we celebrate that gift and make every day “holy” by serving! And as I thought about sharing my sermon, it made sense to first comment on what Chris had done – which was to sit down and do something special for me.

Maybe our Labor Day rest can remind us of the work done our our behalf and the response that our love might embrace in response.