

Counting the Cost

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Series C

Luke 14:25-35

In the film, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, based on the novel by Alexander Dumas, the main character Edmond Dantes escapes from prison and lands on a deserted island. On the island he meets a band of smugglers and is forced to engage in a knife fight with a man named Jacopo. This man, Jacopo, has fallen into the ill-will of the band of smugglers and must fight Dantes to the death in order to have a chance at saving his own life. During the fight, Dantes has nearly defeated Jacopo but makes a deal with the band of smugglers to let Jacopo live. In return, Jacopo, filled with overwhelming gratitude, vows to be at Dantes' side and serve him for the rest of his life. As the film progresses, the audience sees that Jacopo keeps his word entirely. He remains very loyal to Dantes. Edmond Dantes fought for and defended Jacopo and the man responds to the gracious, merciful act, with unflinching loyalty.

Loyalty is what God is after from us. Loyalty to God is summed up in the first commandment of the ten, of which all others follow. In the Gospel reading Jesus speaks about the character and meaning of Christian discipleship and talks primarily of loyalty. The disciple of Christ simply trusts in him first and foremost, following where he leads. The faithful disciple, as Jesus describes that person, does not present conditions to discipleship. The faithful disciple does not present upfront, explicit reservations to following him. There is no, "I will fear, love and trust in God above all else only if . . ." Someone or something ought not to be feared, loved, and trusted in above the one, true God. If someone or something is, then loyalties are divided and two masters are being served (Mt 6:24). The question then remains, "Who is the real master?" As Jesus presents the picture of the disciple to us in the Gospel reading, he speaks of unflinching trust and loyalty.

Of course, why would the Christian not want to trust wholeheartedly in God and be loyal to him to serve him and meet the needs of others? After all, God in Christ has fought for you and defended you. He has bought you back through the sacrifice of Christ and adopted you into his household through the waters of Holy Baptism. He has gone to war with your enemies for you and won your freedom. Why would the one who has heard this good news and believes with heart, soul, mind, and strength that it is true, not want to respond with gratitude and loyal service to their defender and protector? This appears to be the logic with which Jesus operates in our Gospel reading. Like Jacopo with Edmond Dantes, the faithful disciple lovingly trusts God and follows Jesus without condition and reservation because that person knows well God's great love in Christ. That person has "counted the cost" of God's love and is grateful for that price that was paid to purchase their freedom.

God is our defender, our fighter, our Warrior-King. He has fought the fight of freedom and paid the price for us. He has defeated the enemies of Sin, death, Hell, and Satan that separate us from him and has ultimately won the war, bringing about a victory through the Resurrection of Christ. God is also our builder. He breaks the heavens and comes to earth to establish his Kingdom and build the Household of God through his Son. He is building an eternal home and extending an invitation to all people to be a part of it. Jesus himself alludes to this truth about God as "Warrior" and "Builder" when he gives those two illustrations in our Gospel reading and speaks about the meaning of discipleship and the importance of "counting the cost." We are able to "count the cost" of discipleship and remain loyal as Christians today because God

has made up his mind to fight and build. God has resolved to “count the cost” of fighting for your continual, everlasting peace with him. He has resolved to “count the cost” and pay the price of building an eternal home and preparing a place in that home for each and every one of you. Building a home in which he will never evict you even in your most difficult struggles as a disciple.

God is fighter and builder. The Christian theologian Charles Haddon Spurgeon picked up on the truth that God is fighter and builder and titled a magazine that he published, *The Sword and Trowel*. Spurgeon recognized that throughout Scripture God’s activity and work in this world can be summed up in two words, “fighting” and “building.” The Bible opens in a garden. It closes in a city. Between the opening and closing is the story of God’s operation through the ages towards the building of the city, and on the way, because of humanity’s problem with loyalty, sin, disobedience, the Lord fights. As God become flesh, Jesus continues to build and fight for all people (See G. Campbell Morgan, *Luke*, 178).

Toward the end of his Ministry, at the town of Caesarea Philippi, north of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus uses the same two figures of speech, “fighter” and “builder.” He said to his disciples, “On this rock I will build my church”—building (Mt 16:18a). And then he continues, “And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it”—battle (Mt 16:18b). In both cases Jesus reveals his own understanding of the Heavenly Father’s work for him in this world. He came for building. He came for battle.

Once we understand more and more God as Builder and Warrior-King, we come to understand more and more his purposes in this world and why he carries out his plan of salvation the way he does. Also, we see why Jesus puts so much emphasis in the Gospel reading on the meaning of discipleship. Jesus speaks not just to his twelve disciples but to a great, massive crowd of people who are intrigued by his teaching, preaching, and miracles. They all want to enlist as his followers. And so Jesus has a serious conversation about the serious business of discipleship. In effect Jesus gives them his terms. It is as if he says to the great crowd of followers, “As God himself in the flesh, I am in this world for building and for battle. I want men and women who will stand by me until the building is done, and the battles are won.” As I have heard one Christian pastor put it, “The Lord needs men and women that he can depend upon to stand by him, laying brick on brick, though the bullets fly, until he has completely won his war, and fully built his city” (Campbell, *Luke*, 179).

Rest assured that your God has enlisted you. He has purchased your freedom from another Lord, the Lord of Sin and death, so that you can serve alongside him in the building and defending of his Kingdom. And your loyalties will be tested. You will struggle to properly “count the cost.” But he will be loyal to you as you struggle. He will continue to equip you with the power of his Spirit to fight off all that might lead you to surrender your sword and toss aside your trowel. He will forgive you when you ask him. He will feed you his life giving body and blood when you are weary, and he will daily give you opportunities to remember your enlistment ceremony, the event of your Baptism. Your God “counted the cost” and decided that you and I were worth the price. How could we not but respond with unflinching loyalty? So help us God. Amen.