

“Counting on You”

Luke 14:25-33

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By Larry Gaylord

There is a test you can take called The “Can I Count on You?” questionnaire. An explanatory note at the beginning says, “If you were developing a relationship with a friend or a partner, you would probably ask yourself: can I count on this person to be there for me when the chips are down? People sometimes use indicators or signs to help them answer questions like these. Here are some examples of such indicators: “Listens to what I am saying; asks how I am doing; makes time for me even when he or she is busy; treats the people around him or her well; does random spontaneous acts of kindness; would stop what he or she is doing to help me; is generally optimistic; supports my choices; encourages me to go for something I want; shows up on time; doesn’t judge me when I do something stupid; doesn’t lie to me even if it will hurt me; remembers my birthday; stands up for me; genuinely cares about my opinion.” What does it mean to stick by someone? Are we the kind of people that others can count on?

There’s a memorable story that comes out of the Vietnam War. Some American medics were in a village and realized a girl there needed a blood transfusion. Her older brother had her blood type and so through the language barrier with some difficulty the medics asked if they could use his blood for the transfusion. The boy seemed confused but because of his sister’s need he signaled his agreement. As the pint of blood drained from him, the medics noticed tears rolling down his cheeks. Did it hurt, they asked? No it didn’t hurt, he said. It was just that, well, he was glad to be able to help his sister, but sad that he was having to give up his own life so that she could live. He thought his own life was draining out along with that blood. The medics were stunned when they realized what was going on, and what that young man thought he had agreed to do. He was totally unfamiliar with how transfusions worked, and he thought he was giving his life for his sister. He did it willingly; with tears, yes, but willingly. This was a boy who was willing to stick by his sister.

Today’s scripture is really a series of sayings where Jesus describes the cost of discipleship: the cost can include one’s dearest relationships, our most cherished possessions, and life itself. Other than that, nothing much. How did he hope to attract people to his cause with such a list as this? Shouldn’t he have been trying to tell people the benefits of following him, instead of emphasizing all that they would lose by following him? It seems a different message than the inviting Christ who says, “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

But is it? Maybe we shouldn’t look at these tough sayings as just a list of demands. Maybe they are meant to cause to examine our commitment. God has said to us, “I am fully committed to you. I will never forsake you.” That’s the meaning of the Word made flesh, Christ living among us, and giving his life for us. Now the Lord is asking, “Are you committed to me?”

“You can count on me,” says the Lord. “Can I count on you?”

Any general, setting off for battle, needs to know that the bulk of the troops will be there—not peel off, not run away, not hunker down. Gideon felt much more secure with 300 troops who were totally committed than with thousands who were half-hearted and

might run away. Jesus knew that if his mission was to succeed, he would need people who were with him all the way. Are we reliably for God?

Recently it has been revealed that Mother Teresa suffered from the deepest kind of doubt during her lifetime. Reading brief excerpts in her personal diary, we realize that she experienced the profoundest sense of abandonment by God, for decades. This was no passing flicker of uncertainty: it was agonizing, relentless, unrelieved spiritual torment that lasted for most of her life. Well, she never wanted that diary to be revealed to the world. But it was revealed anyway. Some say, Oh, this contradicts all we thought she stood for in her lifetime. No—it confirms what she stood for. What makes her great is the fact that she persevered. She kept going, loving, serving in spite of the inner turmoil. In the broadest sense of the term, that's sainthood. It seems to me that here, Jesus is saying, I need people who will stick by me. I need people whose passionate commitment is to my kingdom of love and fairness. I can deal with any sin, forgive any failing—you don't have to be perfect—but I need to be able to count on you.

It is an astounding thought: God has become vulnerable to that point, entrusting his whole vision in Christ to us. What a risk God has taken! What if God's people don't come through? That's what this familiar anecdote wonders. Perhaps you've heard it before. "Christ chose a motley crew of 12 followers, some of them uneducated, poor, full of human faults. He trained them, commissioned them, sent them out into the world, and depended on them to carry the gospel to the entire human race. Their followers and fellow Christians would then pass the torch to all succeeding generations. "Okay," comes the reply, "that's Plan A. What if that doesn't work? What's plan B?" And the answer: "There is no plan B."

God is counting on us.

I can imagine that God hears all kinds of prayers in a day. Joys and sorrows, 9-1-1 calls for emergency help, praise and complaints, requests for guidance, for food, for healing, desperate people, grateful people. How many of us ask—and I mean no disrespect here: Lord, how are you today? What can I do for you today?

Some years ago a man named Arthur Blessitt took up the call to carry the cross literally: he nailed two boards together and proceeded to walk around the world with his 12-foot cross. He is in the Guinness book of world records for the longest walk—one and a half times around the earth. He hopes to launch a small part of his cross into space. Most of us don't take the words quite the same way. But then, what does it mean to take up the cross? Think of Simon of Cyrene, who helped Jesus with his burden on Good Friday. We are told he was forced into it by the authorities. But he did help the Lord. Tradition says that Simon was so moved by being in the presence of Christ on that fateful day, that he became a follower to the end of his life, and considered his life's greatest privilege the day he shouldered that old rugged cross. Whenever we take up some small part of human need, of life's suffering, and make it our own, and try to minister, then we are taking up the cross. It means, even at the risk of our comfort and security, to adopt as our own Christ's call to be peacemakers. The leader of the eastern orthodox churches, Bartholomew I, patriarch of Constantinople, suggests that in our time, it means taking up the burden to save creation itself. Recently he led a remarkable event: at his invitation, representatives of the Christian churches, of Judaism, of Sunni and Shi'a Islam, of Hinduism and Buddhism, all traveled by boat to the edge of the Illulissat glacier in

Greenland, to offer a silent prayer for our planet, for all species, for the human race. That glacier spawned the iceberg that sank the Titanic, and now it is melting at alarming rate—several times faster than the most extreme computer model had predicted. The consequences of a collapse of the Greenland ice shelf cannot be overstated. The leader of the world's 250,000,000 orthodox believes that this is our call, this is our cross in our time: nothing less than God's creation. God is counting on us.

Sometimes we say or hear it said, I don't ever want to be a burden to anyone—not children, not friends. Yet, we are all burdens to each other, aren't we? Not in a bad way, but in a good way. Life is about caring for and even carrying one another. Bear one another's burdens: That's what the Bible says. To carry the cross is not a curse or punishment, but the very essence of the life of faith. The cross takes us out of our self-concern to concern for others, including those we're in closest relationship with. If we ever get to the place in life where we have no crosses to bear, then we should check in with the Lord to see if we're missing something. We either embrace the cross with joy, or we lug it around lamenting each step of the way. In either case, we carry it, but in the one, it's drudgery, in the other it is joyful and redemptive. Which shall it be? "What a friend we have in Jesus"—it's so true. But what kind of friend does Jesus have in you and in me?

Let us pray:

Lord, our truest friend, may we be as good a friend to you as you have been to us. May we be the kind of people God can count on.