

Sunday September 7, 2025

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 18 – Creation Time 1

Sermon: “The Cost”

This past summer I read a few novels. One of them was a little different. It was a murder mystery. The unusual part was that the police were working with a person who had a unique gift. With the use of her gift, and her skill as an artist, she was able to produce remarkably accurate drawings of the perpetrator of the crime. Her gift went well beyond feeling sympathetic towards a victim, her gift was that, when at a crime scene, she actually felt what the victim felt. In the book, they got carried away with things but suffice it to say that when she used this gift, it drained her energy. It was as though she was the victim herself. How she was able to turn this gift on and off, seemingly at will, I will never understand. All I know is that the use of her gift cost her dearly in terms of her own emotional, spiritual, and physical energy. At the end of a visit to a crime scene she often had to get some sleep to restore her energy. They called her an ‘empath’.

That book, and today’s lesson from Philemon got me thinking about empathy and sympathy, and the difference between them. I found this little video by Brené Brown. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

The apostle Paul was in prison, which was not an unusual place for him to be. Prisons in the first century were not what they are today. They were, for the most part, little more than dank and dirty underground pits. There were no toilets or showers. Neither were there kitchens or cafeterias. If you were in prison, if you didn’t get sick and die, you could die of malnutrition or starvation. Scholars disagree about exactly where Paul was in prison when he wrote to Philemon, but acknowledge that he was aging, and in for an extended period of time. Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves, had fled Philemon and gone to Paul. He ministered to Paul while he was in prison. You can imagine this probably included taking care of emptying the chamber pot, doing laundry, cooking meals, and the like. He was a sort of PSW for Paul.

As much as Paul appreciated his own personal support worker, he also knew that Onesimus was Philemon's slave, Philemon's property. Paul could not keep another person's property, even if that property was a fellow human being. In fact, if Paul kept Onesimus, Paul would be no better than Philemon – holding ownership of another person, and thereby condoning slavery. Paul convinced Onesimus to return to Philemon and deliver a letter that Paul had written to him. The letter is the one we just read. In it, Paul hopes to persuade Philemon to go beyond feeling sympathetic towards Onesimus and going easy on him for running away. Paul hopes to persuade Philemon to be empathetic towards Onesimus – to imagine what it would feel like to be owned by another, and then to act accordingly. Paul is hoping that Philemon will not only spare Onesimus a severe flogging for running away but will feel with Onesimus and will free him from slavery. Then, Onesimus would be free to return to Paul, or stay with Philemon, or strike out on his own – as a free man. The cost to Philemon would be high. He would have to connect with what it would feel like to be the personal property of another. He would have to do a lot of soul searching about himself – what kind of person owned other people? And, he would not only likely lose Philemon as a slave but may feel compelled to free all of his slaves and change his lifestyle completely. Paul was asking a lot.

So, the cost of being an empath is high. The cost to Philemon of engaging in empathy toward Onesimus is high. But what about the costs we face? What about the cost of discipleship? Well, in Luke's gospel, which we did not read today, Jesus ends his talk with these words: "So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

Now wait a minute, Jesus. It's bad enough that we have to expend a few minutes of our precious time each week and a small fraction of our resources to help others, but you want us to give up ALL our possessions!?! And exactly

what possessions are we talking about? That old suit hanging in my closet that is now two sizes too small? I can give that up. But if we get thinking about being empathetic, it might cost me a great deal more than just some money or physical assets. It might cost me physical, emotional and spiritual energy. It might cost me getting out of my comfort zone. It might cost me relationships with friends, or even family, who think the poor are a blight and a drag on the economy and we should cull them the way we would cull deer when there are too many of them in an area. Are energy, comfort, and relationships the possessions that you are talking about? Yikes! How about I just write a bigger cheque to the church next month and we call it even?

If discipleship is about more than just giving up Sunday morning and dropping a toonie on the plate... if discipleship is about feeling with people, especially feeling with the marginalized, the ostracized, the despised in our society.... the cost to us could be.... incalculable.

So here's a question. What is the cost of NOT being a disciple? What is the cost of NOT feeling with the outcast or the marginalized? What is the cost of NOT doing anything about their plight, or about fixing the systemic injustices in our systems that are the root causes of so much suffering?

I received a fall newsletter from Indwell this past week. They shared some of the financial costs, costs that we all pay as taxpayers, when it comes to the homeless, the mentally ill, the addicted. The cost of providing supportive housing is \$2250 per person, per month. But the cost of only providing shelter space is \$6,000 per month, the cost to keep a person in prison is \$12,000 per month, and the cost of hospitalization is \$30,000 per month. Forget all of those costs, and the costs in terms of time and money spent by police, fire and paramedics responding to crises, the costs in terms of time and money of our courts, the costs in terms of time and money of our Emergency Rooms. Forget all of it. Consider the human costs in terms of pain and suffering that

are being paid by NOT feeling with, NOT empathizing with the homeless, the drug addicted, the mentally ill. Consider the human costs in terms of pain and suffering of NOT doing something to solve the root causes of systemic injustices. That is the real cost of NOT being a disciple.

To be sure, the cost of Jesus' call to be a disciple may be steep. It may cost us everything we have – our time, our energy, our comfort, our relationships. But NOT being a disciple will cost us more. It will cost us our humanity.