

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber
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This week a clergy friend told me she thinks her puzzle hobby may have gone too far. The one she is working on now is so challenging, she's not sure she will be done by Christmas! She's wondering if she should abandon. It's easy for a project at work or home or even church to become bigger or more complicated than we had planned. At some point into a project like that, we may have said something like, "I don't think I can do this." "This is way more than I expected." or, "I didn't sign up for this!"

Yes, projects can easily spin out of our control. Well this week, St Martin's, Jesus is saying, tough, people. You obviously didn't sit down and count the cost!

I bet some of us here are right in there with Jesus, kicking ourselves for some decision we really didn't think through, or judging someone else's decision. Some of us might want to say to Jalen Carter, for example, Was spitting at Dak Prescott really worth it? Could you maybe have stopped for a second to consider the cost to the team, how you might have made that game needlessly nail-biting? Did you consider the cost to the Eagles' reputation? Did you consider us, the fans? Did you count all these costs? But I digress.

This Gospel is just the latest in a series of Jesus giving us tough messages about how we need to give away all our stuff to follow him. Today's message is the hardest of all. He is not just saying we need to give up stuff. He is not just saying that his message will cause divisions in families. He is saying that to follow him, we need to be prepared to hate our families and even our life. We need to be ready to give up everything.

Jesus does not seem to be selling his movement very well. Who would sign up for such a brutal assignment? But really, he's just trying to paint a full picture, of what following him will mean.

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus in this Gospel scene. The disciples, and the crowds, had witnessed amazing and wonderful things. Jesus is just saying, if you choose to follow me, it's not all going to be huge catches of fish, healing miracles, walking on water and feeding thousands of people. Some of you will be cut off from your families. Some of you will give your lives. Think about it. Count the cost.

Count the cost. Sit down and count the cost first. Now, for me, here's where I feel like Jesus cannot possibly be serious. Because, how can we possibly count the cost of following him?

If we cannot even know how long that 1000 piece puzzle depicting an impressionist landscape will take us to complete, How can we count the cost of following Jesus?

For any of the big things we say yes to, there is absolutely no way to count or to know the cost. Choosing a life partner. Taking on a cause we believe in. Becoming a parent.

Count the cost. How can we possibly know about the heartache, the loss, the sleepless nights that might follow these decisions? How can we count the cost of a friendship that ends in betrayal? How can we count the cost of walking alongside our beloved as they struggle with serious illness? How can we count the cost of watching our child suffer with anxiety or depression? How can we count the cost of seeing our life's work dismantled with a new policy or administration?

We can't anticipate any of these things. The only thing we can know is that there will be struggles, there will be hurt, and our hearts will be broken. Because bad luck and conflict and illness and death are part of life, we know that our hearts will be broken somehow and someday, whenever we open ourselves to love.

When we open ourselves to love by following Jesus, we can expect the same. We can expect that there will be costs, costs that we cannot possibly count in advance. When we follow the way of Jesus, we are more aware of the needs of our neighbors. When we follow the way of Jesus, we might have to give up at least some of our possessions, we might have to be a little like St Martin and give that extra coat we own, even though we really like it, because when we follow Jesus, we are more awake to our neighbor who has no coat.

When we follow the way of Jesus, our hearts are broken, over and over, by the faces of grieving parents after the latest school shooting. We would love to look away but Jesus calls us to be present and to care. When we follow the way of Jesus, we may be at odds with members of our own family, because when we follow Jesus, we have a much bigger family that calls to us, a much bigger family to which we belong.

When we follow the way of Jesus, we may have to look at ourselves in a different way. We may have to change some things about ourselves, we may have to judge less, be less focused on striving and achieving, we may have to be kinder to ourselves, and that can be difficult and painful too.

Count the cost. We cannot ever possibly count the cost of our decisions to love our spouse, our child, to love and follow Jesus.

We cannot count the cost, and we know the cost will be high. But we do not, we can not, make decisions only thinking of the costs. Because just as we can't know the costs, when we choose to follow Jesus, we cannot know what the gifts will be.

We cannot know what wonders we will witness when we open ourselves to love. The miracle of a child growing into themselves, seeing them do things we know we could never do. The sense of deep purpose we get from doing the work of our heart. The joy of simply being together, in times of celebration and heartache. The gift of growing into ourselves more fully, of becoming more whole, more holy, of discovering more and more how much we are loved by God. The gift of seeing the resurrection after a devastating death. The gift of seeing how living authentically, living by saying yes to love, can bring healing to our world.

We cannot count the cost. We know for sure, there will be times of pain. We know for sure, there will be many, many times when we will say, I don't think I can do this. This is way more than I expected. I didn't sign up for this.

In those times, we can call on Jesus, Jesus who is walking this way with us. We can call on Jesus, who invites us into a life that is costly, it is hard, it is painful. Jesus, who calls us to a life where we say yes to love every time. A life that is hard, yes, and also, bigger and richer than anything we could possibly imagine. Amen.