



northminster presbyterian church

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SCRIPTURE: Philemon 1:1-21 Luke 14:25-33

SERMON: Taking Stock (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

The phrase, "*Taking Stock*" has been very much in my mind over these past few weeks. I have been "Taking Stock" of my sense of call from God for the next chapter of my life and ministry. As a family we have been "Taking Stock" of what we will miss, of what are losing in this transition, as well as all the new things we will be discovering. In conversations with some of you and others who know us, there have been elements of "Taking Stock" as people have expressed their thoughts and prayers, and shared their reflections and good wishes. Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at things, both Janice and Jennifer like to watch HGTV, "Homes and Gardens" Television; Jim and I don't even know that channel number! The result is that we have two resident experts in "Taking Stock" of our home, our furnishings, our belongings, as we get ready to see the house listed for sale.

"Taking Stock" has its place. But if we only made *safe* choices, decisions that seemed to be beneficial to us by some human measure, we would be denying God the space and the need to sometimes move us on, even when some things might not be absolutely perfect or clear or obvious. Viewed from a purely human point of view, I am not sure the Simpson family would ever have decided to follow God's call to come to the USA! Similarly looked at from a solely, self-centered point of view, our move to Clinton, SC, is not necessarily the most obvious next step But for those of us who trust in Jesus Christ, we have to be open to taking stock by paying close attention to what it is God is asking us to do and be. Such faith-guided taking stock is required of all of us coming or going or staying put, and it asks of all of us a good, encouraging, supportive attitude, free from malice or enmity.

This time of transition is also a time for Northminster to take stock; to identify and celebrate all that is good and positive in its shared life, to not be afraid to keep working on weaknesses, to highlight our vision of where God leads, to harness the many significant strengths in this community of faith for the future well-being and development of the congregation and its ministry.

In all of this taking stock, we can each and all be guided by the words and call of Jesus that we hear in today's reading in Luke. Jesus urges any who want to follow Him to be, "Taking Stock", to "Count the cost before they commit!" These words do not indicate that Jesus does not want people to be disciples and followers. Instead, Jesus' concern is that they, and we, know clearly what it is we are into, and so be able to face that challenge of faith openly and fully.

Jesus offers these words to the "large crowds" of people who have started to be attracted to Him. More and more people are catching onto the buzz that surrounds Jesus. They want to hear what Jesus has to say, they want to see Jesus perform signs and miracles. For His part, Jesus knows that He is on the way, not to some luxury resort, not to some beautiful beach house, not to some peaceful Retreat Center, but to Jerusalem. A Holy City – yes, but He already knows what will happen there... *He will be ill-treated and condemned and put to death.*

"Don't commit until you count!" is Jesus' message, a message that demands our attention not as a set of imperatives, not as Law, but as the gift of space and time to realize what our discipleship means. Jesus is saying, "As my disciples, this is what you're signing on for—and that's a fact! So consider this, consider this well!"

Today I encourage you to hear these words of Jesus being spoken and shared in an open, non-judgmental voice pattern. I wish for you to hear Jesus' words not as strident but soft, not as short staccato bursts but as phrases sustained and measured, not with overwhelming, "in a New York minute" insistent urgency but allowing, leaving, indeed creating space for discernment and reflection.

One day when large groups of people were walking along with him, Jesus turned and told them, Anyone who comes to me but refuses to let go of father, mother, spouse, children, brothers, sisters - yes, even one's own self! - can't be my disciple.

Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple.

Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn't first sit down and figure the cost so you'll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you're going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: 'He started something he couldn't finish.'

Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can't, won't he send an emissary and work out a truce?

Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.

We live in the midst of a time of partisan rhetoric; protracted and shrill, ideological, black and white, red or blue. Much of the oratory we hear is simplistic and judgmental, full of appeals for courage, determination and perseverance in the face of the latest threat or in reaction to all that is wrong with what the other side have to say; as if there were or are ever only two sides to any question. Those who have imposed this pattern on us have created a society hungry for simple, easy answers, freeing people from any need to dwell with, to wrestle with the question.

Trusting in what we call the "sound bite" is risky and downright dangerous. "Sound bite" an apt name, because no sound bite is ever fully satisfying *and they always leave teeth marks somewhere!*

This is why my plea today is that we hear Jesus' words in a new and different way. I want to suggest that we step into these words of Jesus and hear their message of "Taking Stock", and "Estimating the cost" as an invitation to discernment rather than as imperatives for action. Our best and fullest response to what Jesus says is *NOT* about getting us "pumped up" as Jesus plays the role of a religious Richard Simmons! No, our best and fullest response requires that we pay attention to Jesus; that we pay close attention to Jesus; *that we live with and live into Jesus' entire life and mission.*

Luke gives us a clue, a hint, that this can be our way into these statements of Jesus when He notes that Jesus turns to the large crowds who are following him to offer these words. By stopping, by turning around even for these few moments Jesus stops the forward momentum of His own journey toward Jerusalem, and implores the crowd to "count the cost", *to know for sure what will be asked of them, and of any and all, who follow Jesus.*

In effect Jesus says to the large crowds following Him, "Take a look!" "Take a look at the people beside you and around you, your mothers, and fathers, and brothers, and sisters", "take a look" at what you cannot keep if you chose to keep going along with me – *to Jerusalem.* Take Stock, Count the cost, be sure you know what it asks of you to be a disciple.

Jesus asks us to be discerning, to be willing to live our lives in such a way that we are constantly engaged with Jesus as we make choices, as we get things right *and even as we get things wrong*.

Jesus invites us into dialogue and partnership. This is not an excuse for lazy or sinful living, but a way of being and becoming in which we can embrace all that is good and seek to reject all that hurts or harms the lives of others, the fabric of creation, the image of God in friend and stranger.

We know, despite many years of trying, that none of us can completely embody the demands of the gospel. None of us has this faith fully figured out. None of us has yet been able naturally and fully to offer our entire heart and mind and soul and body to our Lord. None of us have yet counted the full cost of discipleship. *But God has*. And through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has not only counted the cost, *but paid it in full*.

Taking stock involves identifying what really matters to us about faith and life, and then getting about living and expressing what we discern to be key and central and crucial. This week we will reach the sixth anniversary of 9/11. In an article in the Wall Street Journal on last year's anniversary, Peggy Noonan, writing about the transcripts of telephone calls made by those who became caught up as victims in the midst of the terror attacks, wrote this: "[When] time was short. People said what counted, what mattered. It has been noted that there is no record of anyone calling to say, 'I never liked you,' or, 'You hurt my feelings.' Amazingly - or not - there is no record of anyone damning the terrorists or saying, 'I hate them.' No one said anything unneeded, extraneous or small. Crisis is a great editor. When you read the transcripts that have been released over the years it's all so clear. Flight 93 flight attendant Ceecee Lyles said, 'Please tell my children that I love them very much. I'm sorry, baby.'"

These transcripts and tapes are enduring testimonies to the triumph of love, grace and mercy in the face of hurry, horror, and hatred. They are marvelous examples of people taking stock, of what really matters, *when it really matters*.

My friends, I hope you will pay attention to the words of Jesus that we have considered today. But please, please don't even be tempted to feel guilty as you receive them. Our Lord offers us these hard words today for what they are: an invitation, a possibility, an opportunity for abundant living. Within this church, here in your community of faith, there is a place for each of us, no matter where we are on our unfolding journey of discipleship, toward Jerusalem.

And please do your best to be here next week, because we will be paying attention to Luke 15. I can promise you that these hard words will have given way to one more experience of the unrelenting, unwavering, undaunted, unimagined, unforgettable, undeserved, unbelievable grace of God, *who meets us and claims us in Jesus Christ our Lord*.

Live into the truth that God *loves you* unconditionally, always, even as you are. Accept the promise that God *carries us* when we cannot carry any more crosses. Trust in God, who will *nurture you* when spouses, or children, or parents leave you feeling drained. Believe that God will always keep *seeking and finding and forgiving you*, even if you get buried in the obsessions and possessions of anxious living.

Take Stock and know that it is this God who calls you together and calls you forward in the living and sharing of the grace that God has for all *in Jesus Christ our crucified and Risen Savior!*
Amen.

Philemon 1:1-21

1Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, 2to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. 8For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. 13I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. 17So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Luke 14:25-33

25Now large crowds were traveling with him; and he turned and said to them, 26“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. 28For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. 33So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.