

September 8, Ordinary 23C (Luke 14:25-33)

Jesus isn't known for being on the winning side. His constant mantra is come and die.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [August 28, 2019](#) issue

“Did you count the cost?” Jesus asks me.

“Two point six million—\$654,000 over budget,” I respond.

“Which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost?” Jesus lowers his eyes and shakes his head.

Jesus tells us that a careful builder won't break ground until she has double-checked the architectural drawings and put together a budget with plenty for contingency and permit fees. He says that responsible generals won't enter the battle until they know they can win. But battles go badly, and so do building projects.

My church counted the cost carefully. We did a feasibility study to learn how much we could raise. We prudently kept loan estimates low. We worked diligently with the architects as they designed our church's renovation to be sure we stayed on budget. We pushed for value engineering and negotiated village requirements. All along the way we asked, “And how much will that cost?”

I now know more than I ever wanted to about the cost of asbestos abatement, fire suppression, and the extra-thick concrete pad in the parking lot required by village code to support the weight of a fire truck. And still, when the plans came back our project was \$654,000 over budget.

I call my clergy coach. I can hear the anxiety in my voice. “Have you thought out the worst-case scenario?” she asks, as if that isn't all I've been thinking about, usually between three and five a.m.

“I'm terrified that ten or 20 or 30 years from now my church will have shrunk by half. They will be looking at cutting the last remaining clergy person to part-time

because this project will have saddled the congregation with enormous debt, and everyone will look back to 2019 when I allowed the disastrous decisions that set all of this into motion.”

My coach responds in her soothing southern voice, “Jesus makes a few promises to us. He promises to be with us always. And he promises that we will always be provided what we need.”

That is in fact not true, is my first thought, which I squelch in an effort to appear more faithful. There are loads of churches that are closing because they don't have what they need. There are loads of families that don't have what they need, either. When Jesus shows up, is he bringing his checkbook?

“Jesus’ promise to be with us always doesn’t mean things always work out,” I say. My coach is quick to agree. There are no easy answers or guarantees. Jesus could tell us that. He could say, “Yeah, it’ll probably end in disaster. You want to come?” Jesus isn’t known for being on the winning side. His constant mantra is come and die. It is nothing like the prudent leadership he advocates for builders and generals.

This phrase in verse 33 that means “in the same way” messes me up. Just like builders don’t start a tower until they know they can complete it and generals don’t engage until they know they can win, says Jesus, “none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” You can’t mitigate the cost of discipleship with budget spreadsheets and good project management. Jesus warns the crowds that following him will cost them everything. Other relationships have to come second. It’s about sacrifice—not just of comfort and companionship but of one’s rootedness in a community, one’s present circumstances, and one’s future.

There is no such thing as cutting costs in following Jesus. But I try all the time. I pay careful attention to the economies of leading and preaching in a suburban, mainline church. I try to lead us toward inclusivity but know some people feel left out when I preach too much about LGBTQ people. I try to push us toward justice, but I know people get tired of hearing about politics. I try to lean us toward generosity, but no one wants to hear about money all of the time.

My congregation and I get anxious about how we’re going to pay the bills, maintain our building, and attract the best staff. Evangelism devolves into marketing so that we can get more members to pay our bills. We raised \$1.8 million for a building project. Could we have raised that much to feed the hungry?

Is it possible for the institutional church to actually follow Jesus? Institutions are about self-preservation. Jesus tells us to sell all we have, give it to the poor, and follow him. Institutions can be well-meaning, but can they be sacrificial?

On Monday nights 35 homeless people find shelter and meals in our church building. On Saturday evenings we provide childcare for children with disabilities and their siblings, giving their parents a night of respite. Once a month we host a fellowship group for transgender teens and their families. We couldn't do these ministries without a building.

Receiving a salary and benefits enables me to be more available for ministry. Being the lead pastor of a large congregation gives me a platform from which to speak on issues of justice. Accountability to a denomination and to standards for decision making, financial management, and human resources helps my local congregation act fairly in most circumstances.

We decided to borrow from a land sale trust to finish our building project. It was the right decision for the institution. It remains to be seen if it was the right choice for our discipleship.