

## Counting the Cost

Good evening! I am so very honored that Pastor Manaway invited me to speak tonight! Anniversaries are always significant in the life of a church and I know that this is an especially significant time in the life of this church. Rev. Manaway and I had lunch together a few months ago and he shared with me how God has used this church and how he believes God will continue to guide you and strengthen you and perform mighty works through you. I told a friend of mine, Sister Verlene Jones of Cherry Hill Baptist Church, that I would be delivering the message here tonight, and she said, “Oh, that church is on fire!” So, I am honored to be among God’s people tonight and I am honored to share even for a brief time the pulpit and ministry of my friend, my brother in Christ and a great man of God, Rev. Robert Manaway.

I bring you greetings tonight from your brothers and sisters at Good Shepherd Baptist Church, whom I have the honor to serve as pastor. You heard from nearly a quarter of them earlier. We’re a very small congregation, compared to this mighty assembly, but we strive to be faithful to God so that we can dream big dreams and do big things. I’ll talk a little more about that in a few minutes. I also bring greetings from your brothers and sisters in the Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches, where I am Ministry Associate. Since Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church is aligned with ABC-USA as well as with National Baptists, this congregation is a member of Evergreen Association, along with Good Shepherd, Mount Zion Baptist, Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Baptist, New Beginnings Christian Fellowship, New Bethel Missionary Baptist, Japanese Baptist, Confraternidad Cristiana Eben-ezer, and about 40 others. We would love to learn from your representatives at our meetings and events – we are always the poorer for your absence. I’ll be talking a little more about Evergreen in a few minutes as well.

Any time I start mentioning those I represent in a gathering of God’s people, I always feel as though I can never give a complete answer. I am so aware that my presence here among you tonight is the current culmination of decades of prayer on my behalf from members of the Body of Christ for over 52 years. There were those who prayed for me even before I was born, those who knew how badly my parents wanted a child who would survive past infancy as their first two babies did not. So I am a product of the prayers of First Baptist Church of Herculaneum, MO and of New Bethel General Baptist Church of Bald Knob, AR, where my father and my mother were respectively raised. I am the product of the prayers of Skycrest Baptist Church in Clearwater, FL, and of Maidstone Baptist Church in Kent, England, where I was nurtured as a child. I am the product of the prayers of Northshore Baptist Church in Kings Park, NY, where I was baptized at age 9, and of Kirkwood Baptist Church in Kirkwood, MO, where I preached my first sermons as a teenager. I could go on and on – I’ve lived a lot of places and been raised in the faith by many saints in many congregations. But tonight, I especially ask for your prayers and for your vocal support as I work to bring a message to you from God’s word. Will you support me tonight? And will you pray with me now...

The Good Shepherd folks who are here tonight could tell you that I am a great believer in looking at scripture passages in terms of what we can reconstruct about their original context when I preach. Even though we are nearly two thousand years away from the events of the New Testament and the recording of those events, we have been blessed by God with scholars in our own day, whose God-given intelligence and God-blessed training and study have recreated for us many important details that had become obscured over the centuries. God has given us linguists

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who are fluent in the Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples spoke and in the Greek in which most of the New Testament was written, even though those forms of those languages have not been used for centuries, and Hebrew, which was extinct except for use in the synagogues until the birth of modern Israel. God has given us archaeologists, who can read the evidence of what life was like in the time of Jesus in the mud and dust of ruins, even those long-buried. God has given us sociologists, whose studies can trace the habits of people of the Middle-East, so that we can say with scientific basis, "Look, this is just how it was done when Jesus walked the earth." I thank God for all of these, because when we understand how the people of first century Palestine would have heard the stories of Jesus, we can better understand how to apply them to our own lives, even when our circumstances are radically different. So what you will hear from me tonight is what I have gleaned from the best minds of the last few generations run through the filter of my own experience. I have taken these ideas before God in prayer and prayed for God's guidance as I have sought to bring you my own imperfect understanding of God's perfect word. If any of my words tonight cause your hearts to burn within you, then give glory to God. If you hear nothing in this message for you, then the fault is mine and I would ask that you would forgive me as God, I know, has forgiven me.

The topic of this passage is the cost of discipleship. If we step back just three verses in Luke 14, we learn that Jesus is on the move, preaching and healing his way through the land on his way to Jerusalem. So powerful has been his preaching, so astonishing the miracles he has performed, that he is now followed by large crowds. Now, if Jesus had been the kind of Messiah that the crowds were expecting, preparing to expel the Romans by force, or had he been a modern politician, trying to get all the votes he could, or had he even been a particular type of Baptist preacher, encouraged by his trustees to bring in all the people he could, he might have welcomed those crowds. He might have said, "Everybody follow me! I'll take you where you want to go!" But that's not what he said. He didn't compromise his message or his mission for the sake of popularity. He knew that truly following the God of Israel, the Creator of All, could be harder than most folks expect. And so he turned around and said to them, "Are you sure? Are you really sure? Are you really sure you want to follow me? Because there's a cost involved. If you want to follow me," Jesus said, "you've got to be ready to walk away from your family. If you want to follow me," Jesus said, "you've got to be ready to walk away from your life. If you want to follow me," Jesus said, "you've got to be willing to die in pain and humiliation. There's a cost involved. Are you sure? Are you really sure?"

And then, to help them understand what he was asking, he told them two parables. First came what we might call the parable of the home owner. "For 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?" Now, this might seem like an odd question for Jesus to ask. What did he know about being a home owner, after all? He had abandoned his home in Nazareth to his mother and his brothers; we know that from the Scriptures. We also know that he said of himself that, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." So what did Jesus know about planning home improvements?

The answer, also from the Scriptures, is that Jesus knew about planning home improvements because he knew it from the other side. He knew about this because he was a carpenter or, to use the Greek of the New Testament, a tekton. Although we most often see this word translated as

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carpenter in English bibles, it actually referred in that time to a craftsman, one who could work in wood or stone or any other material. We know that Jesus' earthly father, Joseph, was also a tekton, a craftsman, but work must have been scarce in the tiny village of Nazareth. By the time Jesus grew to manhood, though, things would have picked up as Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, was having a new city built not far away, the city of Tiberias. Those would have been fairly good times for craftsmen such as Jesus and Joseph. But we all know that even in good time, building projects fail. Folks get excited about the building all around them and decide that they want to keep up with their neighbors. Sometimes, they fail to plan adequately and suddenly find themselves out of money with the job only half done. Work shuts down; laborers and suppliers go unpaid; suddenly there is a little pocket of poverty and misery amidst the excitement of prosperity. Did Jesus know this from personal or family experience? Had he or Joseph gone one day to collect their wages from hard work well done only to be told, "Sorry, we ran out of money. I've got nothing for you." Did the family of Joseph experience hunger for a time until another job came in after the unexpected failure and failure of payment? "...when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'" In a culture like first century Palestine, where honor was everything, this sort of failure could hang around a person's neck for the rest of their life. Jesus knew that to build, one needed to plan.

I can tell you from my experience that careful planning, accompanied by faithful prayer, can take us to places with God's help that we can hardly dare to believe. I am pastor of Good Shepherd Baptist Church today because of just such careful planning and faithful prayer. Nine years ago, while they were between pastors, that little congregation entered into a prayerful planning process and they dared to dream big dreams. They felt called by God to take the unused portion of their campus, ultimately half of their property, and build a building, not for their own use but for providing very-low-income senior citizens with a safe and comfortable place to live. They prayed and they met and they planned and they debated and ultimately they came to a consensus on how to do this crazy thing. They were, as the Book of Acts says about the early church, in one accord. That little church, only about 30 on Sunday mornings, took on an eleven million dollar project and they called me, a man with almost no pastoral experience but years of non-profit management experience to help them. They had researched the very best advisors that American Baptists and the Puget Sound Region had to offer and brought them in to be their partners. And they prayed without ceasing.

Along the way, there were problems. There were neighbors who believed we were up to no good, that we would get city approval and build a slum or that we were going to profit in some way from the project, getting rich at government expense. Church leaders made sure that these neighbors got to air their complaints and fears. We altered details of our plans several times to answer their concerns. We showed them that the property was being donated to the project, not sold. We shifted the building's footprint on the property, partially blocking the view of our sanctuary but preserving the integrity of the neighborhood as our neighbors saw it. We made sure that the design presented a gracious aspect to the street and to our neighbors. We honored their wishes and we continued to pray and to maintain our own consensus. At every step, at every gathering, we prayed, "O God, not our will but thine be done."

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Today, Shepherd's Garden, a 40-unit affordable housing complex for seniors, has been open for two and a half years. Good Shepherd Baptist Church has received awards from Beacon Development Group, American Baptist Homes of the West, and American Baptist Homes and Caring Ministries for their dedication to a vision given by God. The building itself and its management have received the highest rankings from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and from the National Housing Association of Management Agents. Best of all, Shepherd's Garden is home to about 50 folks who might otherwise be in substandard housing or worse. Why am I telling you this? Not to boast for myself but to honor a little group of God's people who were faithful in planning, who were faithful in considering all of those who would be impacted, who were faithful to each other, who were faithful in prayer. Good Shepherd Baptist Church took seriously the calling of Jesus to consider the cost and we and others have been blessed for it. We achieved this miracle in Lynnwood not by our own strength but by God's.

Likewise, I am proud of how our Evergreen Association of American Baptist Churches has grown and developed in the last 11 years. Again, I would attribute our success to careful, prayerful planning and to listening to each other. You may know that ABC-USA is the only denomination in the United States that does not have a racial majority in its membership. Our national body is made up of faithful Baptists who trace their heritage to Europe and to Africa, to various countries in Asia and to Haiti. Our members include Native Americans and Hispanic Americans. But we've not always been any better at coming together than any other segment of American society. We've discovered though, in Evergreen, that by truly listening to each other, by building consensus in our planning and by making sure that power equations are equalized through the use of ethnic caucuses and consensus-based decision making, we have begun to come together across racial and ethnic barriers in a way that is a model for other groups. I praise God that God has given us the power to be authentically together, to celebrate our differences and to serve God as the Body of Christ in association. Planning, listening and honoring God's voice in each other is bringing us remarkable blessings as we "build our house."

Jesus told them another parable. "...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?" Now what does a tekton, a craftsman from a tiny village, know about kings and war and diplomacy? We cannot forget that Jesus was also a Son of David, descended from Israel's greatest king, the king after God's own heart. It was many generations since Jesus' earthly ancestors had sat on the throne but Jesus would have known the family stories and he would have known what the Scriptures taught about his royal forebears. He would have known about the bad kings descended from David, the ones who scorned the God of Abraham and promoted the gods of other nations or simply allowed the people to run wild religiously. And he would have known about the good kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, who reformed worship in Judah, refurbishing the temple and tearing down idols and having the Law read to the people again. But he would have also known that even Hezekiah and Josiah were flawed.

If we read carefully in the books of the prophets, primarily in Isaiah, we can find the roots of Jesus' teachings here about kings wanting to go to war. While the books of II Kings and II Chronicles praise Hezekiah for trusting God and guiding the people back to true worship, Isaiah

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tells how Hezekiah rebelled against the Assyrian Empire, which nearly destroyed Judah as a result. Only the miraculous intervention of God and a heavy, heavy tribute to Assyria saved the little kingdom. Despite his piety, Hezekiah had decided to meddle in international affairs too great for him. Isaiah takes him to task for allying with Egypt to defy Assyria. Listen to this from Isaiah 30 & 31: “Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord, who carry out a plan, but not mine; who make an alliance, but against my will, adding sin to sin; who set out to go down to Egypt without asking for my counsel, to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh, and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;... Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!” Hezekiah does well in making sure his people worship the Lord but then he does not include prayerful planning when it comes to doing his work as a king. He does not gather the consensus of wise, Godly people, but ignores the warnings of Isaiah. He does not remember his responsibilities to his neighbor, Assyria, but breaks faith and prepares for war. He ends up suing for peace and only a disease sent by God on his enemy’s armies saves him.

The story of Josiah is even sadder. The great-grandson of Hezekiah, he too is praised for religious reforms carried out at his direction after two generations of neglect or worse from the throne. And, like Hezekiah, he fails to maintain an attitude of listening to God himself when it comes to dealing with the great nations surrounding tiny Judah. In Josiah’s time, Egypt had allied with Assyria against the growing Babylonian Empire. Josiah chose to try to block Egypt so that Judah’s old enemy, Assyria, might fall. He rides out to give battle to Pharaoh Neco, who warns Josiah that in this instance, he is disobeying God. Josiah refuses to give way and is killed. From that time forward, the Children of Israel never have another strong king. Like Hezekiah, Josiah ignores warnings from men of God. Like Hezekiah, he is more interested in gaining glory for himself in battle than in truly serving God’s people. Like Hezekiah, his insistence on following God’s will in worship does not seem to extend to following God’s will in his “real life.” These kings relied on their own strength and not on God. Their plans failed.

The homeowner in the first story simply failed to plan. His failure brought shame on him and hardship for the craftsmen and suppliers who depended on him. These kings who were ancestors of Jesus himself failed because they made their plans with their own desires in mind, not God’s. Even when Isaiah spoke to Hezekiah of how God was displeased, Hezekiah did not listen. Josiah couldn’t hear the word of God when even Egypt’s Pharaoh brought him the words from the mouth of God. They were too busy making themselves important to consider what God wanted. They didn’t care if they hurt their neighbors or the people who relied on them. Their plans were flawed.

After telling these two stories, Jesus said, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” He said, “Listen; here’s the cost, so plan for it. If you’re not willing to give up everything you have, if you’re not willing to become as nothing in the eyes of the world, you will not have the power to follow me in God’s plan.” You will not have the power. That’s a more exact translation of Luke’s Greek phrasing of the words of Jesus. You will not have the power. The Greek word is *dynamai*, from which we get words like *dynamo* or *dynamite*. To be true disciples, we must have the power. It is the power to plan. It is

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the power to listen for God's voice as we plan. It is the power to be humble, seeking God's will and glory rather than our own. It is the power that comes from God.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, he reports that the angel Gabriel comes to Mary to tell her she will have a son, the Son of the Most High, the heir of David, whose kingdom shall never end. When Mary questions this, Gabriel tells her that not only is it true but that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. It is all about God's power, he says. "For nothing will be impossible," the Greek word is *adynateo*, powerless, "with God." Nothing that God touches is without power. Later, Luke records that Jesus says, "What is impossible (*adynatos*) for mortals is possible (*dynatos*) for God." Even though we cannot do some things on our own power, God will supply the power to make them happen. The apostle Paul later takes up the theme in his letter to the Philippians: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

And so, my sisters and my brothers, I want to leave you tonight with some questions and an answer. As you stand on the cusp of your sixty-third year in the service of God as a congregation, if you plan wisely, what is possible for God to do through you? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If you pray, as you plan, "God, not our will but yours be done," what is possible for God to do through you? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If you plan with the good of your neighbors and those in need in mind, what is possible for God to do through you? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If you keep yourself humble before God, willing to give all that you own and all that you have to be a true disciple of Jesus, what is possible for God to do through you? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If tiny little Good Shepherd could bring to fruition the dream that God gave them, what is possible for this mighty congregation of Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If they could succeed with an untried, inexperienced pastor, what might you accomplish under the leadership of this great man of God, Robert Manaway? The answer, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

May God hear and bless the prayers and the faith of God's people in this place. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.