

Sermon – Luke 14:25-33
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“Finishing What You Start”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. For which of you, intending to repair and repaint a two-story deck, does not first sit down and make a plan, estimate the cost, check the weather, and figure out if you actually have enough time to do the work? And which of you would not also determine at the outset how much paint and primer you need, never mind discerning whether you own or have access to a power washer and an orbital sander and a tall-enough ladder and wood filler and deck screws and, oh, you know, paint brushes? I mean, which of you would undertake such a project without planning things out ahead of time? Well, perhaps *you* would have. I sure didn't. But, after talking for some time about the need to tend to our deck, we just jumped in. Having borrowed a power washing, I assaulted our deck on Tuesday, blasting away bunches of paint. Standing there when finished, coated in a light mist and plastered with paint chips, Erika and I looked at each other and said, “Well, now we *have* to finish.” Since that time, we've made multiple trips to the local paint and hardware stores, borrowed tools from benevolent friends, and listened to neighbors rightfully express their concern for my well-being. What was I doing on top of that ladder while wearing flip flops, anyway? But onward we march, and this project should be completed tomorrow, should the Lord smile upon us in mercy and with sunny weather. Which of you, intending to start something, would not first have plans to finish it? Well, Jesus, if I'm

- being honest? Me. I would. I'm the one who would fail to make the necessary plans, to count the cost. When it comes to home repair, thank God for Erika.
2. No doubt many of you are thinking that I should stick to preaching, and you're probably right. But Jesus' words today aren't really about me repairing a deck; neither are they about building towers or going to war. Jesus speaks hard words to us today, words that cut past the particularities of our failings, convicting us of our willful inability to prepare for or stay focused on the task at hand. Created for a life of praise, our attention instead drifts inward. Called to a life of discipleship, we too often serve ourselves. Beckoned to follow, we wander aimlessly, chasing after this or that. We are unfocused; inattentive. This goes beyond the constant checking of phones or changing of channels. We are casual narcissists, always imagining that we are in control of our own destiny, minds wandering away from the task at hand, on the lookout for something better. We imagine ourselves free and without limits. But as Matthew Crawford writes in *The World Beyond Your Head*, "Autonomy talk speaks the consumerist language of preference satisfaction. Discovering your true preference requires maximizing the number of choices you face: precisely the condition that makes for maximum dissipation of one's energies." In other words, our seemingly infinite choices lead not to freedom, but paralysis. Put theologically, we are idolaters, focus flitting from one thing to the next, attention turned everywhere except God. God, if God enters our mind at all, tends to come last.
 3. Today, Jesus cuts through the noise. He speaks hard words to force us to listen. Family, possessions, life itself must be left behind if we are to follow him. But Jesus does not ask anything of us that he does not do first. He doesn't hate his family, but his focus on his ministry separates them. He carries nothing with him, has no place to lay his head. He will leave behind life itself on the cross, descending into a darkness so deep he believes his Father has forsaken him. Jesus is single-mindedly focused on his mission to

- build the Kingdom and wage war against sin and death. He has counted the cost, and it will cost him everything. Yet he is undeterred. He asks us to follow only where he himself goes first.
4. Jesus, of course, does not demand we stop painting decks or building towers. Neither does he want us to hate our families or give up on life. He is, however, calling for a radical reordering our own lives that can only begin when we emerge from the baptismal tomb and enter into newness of life. The cold waters, like Jesus' words, grab our attention and turn us toward him. Focused, we can see beyond all that would claim our time and energy; focused, we can see God. As the French philosopher Simone Weil writes, "This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as [God] is, in all his truth."
 5. In the first episodes of the new *The Lord of the Rings* television series, *The Rings of Power*, we are reintroduced to the elven Lady Galadriel, who, amid a world that would rather pretend there's nothing to worry about, is focused on finding the enemy and rooting out evil. Adrift on a flotsam raft with a new character named Halbrand, Galadriel is assaulted by a storm, winds and waves buffeting their poor craft. Confident and compassionate, she speaks to the man: "Bind yourself to me." While this line, no doubt, will echo in unforeseen ways as the story plays out, Galadriel's motives are pure, her intentions kind. Bind yourself to me, she beckons, and together we will see the journey through. As Christ calls us to follow, the invitation is similar. We cannot complete the journey on our own, so we are called out of ourselves, bid to bind ourselves to Jesus. As Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*, "To deny oneself is to be aware only of Christ and no more of self, to see only him who goes before and no more the road which his too hard for us. Once more, all that self-denial can say is: 'He leads the way, keep close to him.'"

6. We do not always, cannot always, know where the road is leading us. We begin projects and abandon them. We are interrupted by illness and affliction. We imagine we have infinite choices, equating choice with freedom. But eventually we hit dead ends, find ourselves in cul-de-sacs of our own making, trapped by circumstances that roll over us like storms. Just there, Christ calls us, granting us the true freedom that comes not from infinite choice, but from being chosen by the infinite. So chosen, we are left with no choice at all. There is nowhere to go but in the footsteps of our Messiah, following as he leads. As we journey, he will restore our relationships, moving us from hate to love. He will give meaning to our projects and wage war against the evil in this world and in our hearts. He will move us from the false lives we have created into death, and out of death into the life for which we were created. For God will not be thwarted. God's project of creation will not be undone. God will complete what God has started. Jesus, counting and knowing the cost, will pay the price and finish the job. He has carried the cross for us. Bound to him, let us follow where he leads. There's not really anywhere else to go. May our focus ever be on Christ, the One who has chosen you at great cost to himself, for you are precious in his sight, and he will finish the work he began in you. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.