

Let us pray:

Heavenly God, we give you thanks for your word, for your activity in our lives and your presence in our time of need. We ask that you would open our eyes to see our own hypocrisy this morning Lord, because without you, we cannot be made new. Send your Spirit to our side, and open our ears to hear your words of love and care. This we ask in the name of the King, amen.

At a board meeting this week, we were discussing the doors that lead into the hall from the parking lot: down the stairs outside, there are two doors that lead in, and it was remarked that it's a bit of an architectural oddity, and perhaps not the most efficient, because although there are two doors, there's really only one of them that ever gets used. We could brick the second one off, and glue the door on the outside wall in the same place, and see how long it would take for someone to notice.

As I was sitting in the meeting thinking of the sealed-off door, I had an idea pop into my head: once we'd bricked it off, hang two signs: above the sealed door a sign that says "For the righteous only" and over the door that actually works: "Sinners only".

But we must have the mindset of walking in through that second door, and not the first, when we come here, when we come to scriptures like these. When we hear Jesus' words, that we must love him more than our families, when we hear the Psalmist cry out about the hardship faced when pursuing the ways of God, when we read Paul's writing about being slaves to sin and crucified with Christ, or Jeremiah's hardship in prophesying. If we come to these texts through the door of the righteous, with our heads held high and proud, certain that we hear them from the side of the transformed and not from the seat of sinners, we are in grave danger.

One theologian that I find writes powerfully on the necessity of humility and need to examine ourselves is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a well known German theologian who was an outspoken critic of Hitler's rise to power in Nazi Germany. He fled Germany to preach in England, only to return to Germany, knowing the dangers full well, to create underground seminaries and minister to his people. He was ultimately connected with a plot to assassinate Hitler, and executed just days before the end of the war. His writings are powerful, speaking of the need for Christians to be prepared to abandon all in

the pursuit of Christ, to, in the words of Jesus, lose their life for his sake.

He begins one of his most famous works, titled “The Cost of Discipleship”, with a ringing challenge to the kind of “cheap grace” that bypasses the need for repentance. I will now read an excerpt from that chapter. Bonhoeffer writes:

“Cheap grace means grace sold on the market like cheapjacks' wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolations of religion are thrown away at cut prices. Grace is represented as the Church's inexhaustible treasury, from which she showers blessings with generous hands, without asking questions or fixing limits. Grace without price; grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing. Since the cost was infinite, the possibilities of using and spending it are infinite. What would grace be if it were not cheap?...

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all, it is costly because it

cost God the life of his Son: "ye were bought at a price," and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God."

When I read these words, I find myself reflecting on my own willingness to respond to the call of costly grace, the call to pick up my cross, to die to sin. This is a hard teaching for us. The life we have in Christ is priceless. It is worth more than anything, but nothing we have is too high a price to be asked of us.

I find examples of this in my own life. I try very hard to be a "man of principle", I think about what sort of person I want to be, and try to act accordingly. Sometimes, that helps me. Sometimes, it does not. I don't want to be a person who gets into fights with others, and so I avoid conflict, even when there are conversations that should happen. I hesitate in extending hospitality when my house is messy, because I want to be in control of my image. But we must be ready to throw away our image, to see ourselves defamed and despised. That isn't easy, is it? Ultimately, am I really ready to follow Christ if I would turn away someone who came to me for help because there were dirty dishes on the table and laundry that needed to be done?

It may be that this word is a word that seeks to bring not peace, but a sword into your life. It may be that something is being asked of you: a dream of your own that you must let go, pride that must die, a habit that must be broken at great cost. We are called to submit ourselves to death, to withhold nothing from God, to be willing to throw everything we have away to pursue God's will. May we die to sin.

And once we do, may we live in Christ. May we be filled with the love of the one who counts every hair on our heads, who cares for the birds and clothes the lilies of the field. God is full of grace and compassion, a great love that never fails, never gives up, and will not leave us orphaned. This is good news! The gospel is that we gain abundant life when for Christ's sake we lose what we have. When we empty ourselves, when we let go of whatever it is in our lives that we are clinging to with all our might, we are filled with joy, with love, with

faith and blessing. God watches over us, and the new life which is offered to us today, although costly, is priceless.

I would like to close with a word of prayer, please bow your heads with me:

God of costly grace, we give you thanks for the example you showed us in your life in Jesus of Nazareth: a sinner's death on a cross, and the glory of his resurrection and ascension. Our prayer this morning is for ourselves. We are gathered here as sinners, we have brought our sin with us even today. Lord, convict us and open our hearts and our hands; may we be willing to drop everything to follow you, may we be willing to leave everything behind to follow you. Show us the ways that we need to change, and make us new. Father, hear our prayer. Amen.

O God,
You are overflowing with love,
infinite in kindness,
and incomparable in glory.
You are the source of all good things.
There is none like you in all imagining.

When new life springs forth from death,
You give us hope.
When all things work together for good,
You show us the ways as wisdom.
When your presence is felt among us,
we experience you as holy.
Inspired by the many ways you break into our lives,
we turn to give you thanks with our prayers,
praise with our hearts
and honor with our lives,
this day and forever.

As we think of you and your holiness, we realize how different we are from
you.
We have come this morning as broken people, bringing lives that have been
bent,
Bent away from your ways of love and righteousness. Hear us now as together
we confess our sins:

In the name of Jesus our brother and saviour we pray, amen.

The Lord our God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love and faithfulness. Forgive one another, and know that you are
forgiven.

God ever creating, God ever loving, God ever leading:

We give you thanks for all that we have received today: for food and shelter, for the sunshine and eyes to see it, and for the joy of it on our skin. For our families and friends, for our financial security, and for the salvation you offer us in Jesus Christ. As Jesus taught us, we pray for ourselves and our world:

Wherever people are unhappy because of their work, overwhelmed by their responsibilities, or anxious about the future, where people sit idle and feel of no use:

Your kingdom come.

Where people are lonely or searching for love, where people are trapped in unhealthy, uncaring, or violent relationships, where people are in pain because of the loss of friendship or a sense of purpose:

Your kingdom come.

Where people feel pain in their bodies, in their minds or spirits, where people seek healing or help, where illness has eroded hope and desperation has moved in:

Your kingdom come.

Where people gather to make the world a better place, where people work with science, medicine, law and the economy to improve the quality of life and society, where even one person strives to build a better and more beautiful world:

Your kingdom come.

Wherever new life has begun, where hope flickers, where the morning light comes after a long period of darkness:

Your kingdom come.