**February 17, 2019 – “Calculating the Cost of Covenant.”**

***Luke 6:17–26***

Rev. Rudolph van Graan

You may be familiar with German Theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a Nazi prisoner camp shortly before the end of the Second World War. Not only is he revered for his stance against the war which subsequently cost him his life, but he is also known for the many writings in which he explained much of his theology, in particular what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. His book, Cost of Discipleship, is a classic of Christian thought. I was looking for my copy to bring with me today, but we have recently moved offices and I could not find it.

The Cost of Discipleship centers on an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount, (Matthew 5) in which Bonhoeffer spells out what he believes it means to follow Christ. Similar to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, is the Sermon on the Plains as recorded by Luke. Both these sermons include ethical instructions and a set of Beatitudes / blessings; blessed are those who are poor, mourn, meek, righteous, etc. From a distance these Lucan Beatitudes look almost the same as the ones from Matthew, but a closer look reveals quite a number of differences, such that one might ask, are they really the same? Does using short lines introduced by the words “blessed are you” make them the same? Of course the version in Luke also repeats the words “woe to you” at the start of every proclamation. The woe part often makes us feel uncomfortable.

I caution against reading these blessings and woes simply on a literal level, it may not be wise, especially when progressives like we in the United Church of Christ claim to read the word of God not literally, but dynamically. An analysis of these blessings and woes reveals a set of 4 opposites, poor – wealthy, hungry – full, weep – laugh, and hated – praised.

Blessed are you who are poor, opposed to woe to you who are rich.

Blessed are you who are hungry, opposed to woe to you who are full.

Blessed are you who weep, opposed to woe to you who laugh.

Blessed are you when you are hated, opposed to woe when you are praised.

Looking at them separately brings many problems, looking at all of them together as a unit makes sense. It really only speaks about the width and breadth of the opposites in life, the polarity of life that oscillates between the hilltop experiences of human living and the misery, despair of our human condition: the one moment you may be on a hilltop of happiness, the next moment you may be down in the dumps of sadness and misery. The one moment you may be on a hilltop of health and prosperity, the next moment you may fall victim to illness or suffering. The one moment you may be on the cusp of popularity and emotional fulfillment, but we all know those moments of intense loneliness when the world caves in on us.

And since this is a generic situation, common to all of us, why not let that guide us in our interaction with one another? Why would we think less of someone just because he or she is on the opposite end of the scale? Why would we disrespect one another when we know we could be there right now? Why would I disrespect another when I know I could be in that same boat tomorrow? Jesus immediately follows up with the question of hating our enemies: “Why then, would you even hate our enemies, why not love them, turn the other cheek, give someone your coat as well as your shirt. … do to others as you would have them do to you?” Friends, the human condition is one and the same shared by everybody, regardless of where you might find yourself in this very moment. This in itself, is humbling, and should lead us to seeking better ways of living together.

Which brings me to this book, also by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, that I was able to find on my shelf, “Life Together, the Classic Exploration of Christian Community.”

Not only did Bonhoeffer understand that Christian faith is not a “me and me alone” business, even though he understood and paid with his life, the cost of Discipleship, but he clearly nudges us on to the next level, that of authentic Christian community, living together as people of God, that he explores in this book. I would go so far as to state that this book has also been a staple for theological students, many Bible study groups and book clubs throughout the United States. Many read this book and asked the deep questions as to what exactly is an authentic Christian Community.

So Bonhoeffer essentially asks two questions: a) How to follow Jesus? and b) How to live together?

I hope you can now see how I come full circle to the sermon theme of this morning, “Calculating the Cost of Covenant.” Covenant is that which undergirds an authentic Christian community, as Covenant is that agreement that underlies everything, and stays intact even when covenantal partners falter. I was looking for appropriate Covenant language, and I found these quotations in the new Manual on Ministry that has just been launched in the United Church of Christ. In our Conference, which I represent here today, we live by Covenant.

*“Covenant” will become the shared understanding and guiding principle for us as a Conference. Covenant is what binds us together, it guides us in the way we live together and make decisions pertaining to our well-being. Covenant remains in place, even when individuals might falter or drift away. Covenant is relational; covenant is grounded in our deep faith traditions, going back to the ancient patriarchs of the Old Testament and their walk with God.*

*“Covenant – the commitment of God to God’s people, of the people to God, of the people to one another as the Body of Christ – is foundational to UCC identity and is at the heart of our governance. God’s Covenant with creation and humankind inspires deep and binding commitment in relationships within and beyond the Church, “that they may all be one” (John 17:21). The church is called together by God; all members and setting of the Church are interrelated, sharing a common identity as the Body of Christ. The covenantal relationships between parts of the Body of Christ are characterized by mutuality, transparency, accountability, and a desire to represent Christ together for the glory of God.”*

*What applies to the settings in the denomination is also true of individual member churches: “In the United Church of Christ, the settings of the denomination are separate in governance and individual in conscience yet belong to one another in Christ’s name for the mission of God. They honor one another’s integrity, listen carefully to each other and “seek to walk together in all God’s ways.”*

Bonhoeffer in this book, chapter 4, speaks of ministry in the authentic Christian Community. Let me just read to you the headings, as I think you will clearly understand each heading is almost a sermon on its own.

* The ministry of holding one’s tongue – hmm – let me not tell you how many times I had to bite my tongue.
* The ministry of meekness – meekness leads to ability to serve one another.
* The ministry of listening – we listen way too little to one another, less speaking and more listening.
* The ministry of helpfulness – help on all levels, not just financially.
* The ministry of bearing one another, bearing other’s burdens.
* The ministry of proclaiming – speaking truth to one another.
* The ministry of authority – almost the other side of the coin of integrity.

You know your congregation. You know how close or how far you are from the mark of authentic Christian Community. Perhaps it might behoove you to rate yourself as a community on a scale and have conversation of where you fall short and where you ought to improve, right? Nobody is better than another, no community can boast of their achievements, as, when reading the gospel of Luke, things may change in a heartbeat. You may be high now, and down in a minute. You may be struggling now, but lifted high by the grace of God in a wondrous display of opportunity, integrity, and blessing. Covenant means that when one is blessed, it is not meant to be a blessing in and on itself, it is meant to be a blessing to others. This message is simple, but this message is adequate.

May you as a congregation learn what it means to live in covenant, members living with one another, but also your congregation living with other congregations, as we all work together to be God’s witnesses in this world. May you as a congregation become a beacon of hope for those who have fallen from their mountaintop experiences and are in desperate need of some TLC, that, while your congregation also know where to take hands and strengthen bonds of faith and cooperation across your city, your region, our Association, the Southern Association, and Conference of the United Church of Christ. We are all together in authentic Christian ministry. When we stand together, we stand strong.

In the words of Luke, Go and be a blessing, and Woe to you if you should fail – I am just kidding – I will never judge you as I would not want to be judged. But seriously, let us all live into our convenient, into our faith and into authentic Christian community, to the glory of God.

Amen.