“Counting the Cost

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I brought a few things to show you this morning, not only for small children were they here, but also for us “big kids.” One was a gift from the chimney repair man who told me that he “just loves burls.” I don’t have any of the burls that my brother has fashioned into art, but I now have two burl bowls made by the chimney repair man in Camden. A burl grows as what looks like an ugly growth on the outside of a tree. If you haven’t noticed them before, I invite you to look around to notice them after today. They are ugly to start, but they can be made to look beautiful in an artist’s hand. This other object is one I have heard called various things: a bracket fungus, a shelf fungus, or an artist’s fungus. I like “artist’s fungus.” You can imagine that this one I am showing you, given its crinkly shape, is quite old. My uncle, who has been gone a since 1995, etched onto it my mother’s home in Lincolnville and the lighthouse on Islesboro, which she couldn’t see but could certainly imagine across the water. I keep this in a little area where my cat can’t reach. Again, fungus is kind of ugly when you see it growing, kind of unlike the tree it grows on. Still, in the artist’s hand, in this case my dear Uncle Allen, it is beautiful. We can take, as the potter does, even that which is broken and turn it into something beautiful.

On the outside of this beautiful scallop shell is a barnacle and on the inside is a kind of a scar. It was in looking at how these so-called imperfections and differences from the original that are so beautifully, so fearfully and wonderfully made, and also in thinking about the diversity of faces among my college classmates gathered together on a Facebook page that I was struck by the incredible diversity of all things and of all God’s peoples. This world is full of beautiful people—and beautiful trees, and shells, and beautiful shells of people.

Yes, that’s what I said: “beautiful shells of people.” I often think that if only each person on this entire Earth of ours knew that God hems them in, behind and before them, and that God’s hand has lain on them all their life long, there would be greater joy worldwide. Perhaps, too, there would be greater peace worldwide if we each acknowledged that omnipresence of God’s hand, touching each one of God’s created humanity. It’s a powerful thought, isn’t it, and a beautiful one? God is present everywhere, all the time, hemming in the humanity designed and loved so perfectly.

This is not to say that we don’t have scars, and that we haven’t struggled to move past difficulties. Most of ours are unlike the bands in trees, invisible until revealed with a final felling. More like shells, our outward scars tell the stories of some of our mishaps, large and small. There is no one immune from scraped knees and also from the pain of loss or sorrow. So, some of what we might call scars might really be more like trees’ rings, with only our maker knowing how deep the cuts were to leave their unseen mark on our hearts. And every person under the sun has them. Mothers and fathers in China, sisters and brothers in Missouri or Minnesota and Maine, aunts and uncles in Gaza, cousins in Ukraine, Israel, and Afghanistan have scars on the inside and out. Life is not easy, but it is always a gift—God’s gift, fearfully and wonderfully given.

Wondering actively along with world leaders in the past years, we may find ourselves wrestling with the U.S. position regarding the war in Gaza and what should be the U.S. response. Reading our Gospel lesson from Luke, I couldn’t help but recognize a bit of irony in Jesus’ example as regards our own current situation. Jesus wants his disciples to understand that to follow him is not easy. It demands from us the greatest of human, of mortal sacrifices. He stresses this by saying that to follow him means to leave behind what we hold most dear: our original families; even to hate mother and father, sister and brother in order to follow Jesus completely. This has been singularly the most difficult passage for me to reconcile with, and throughout my life. How could Jesus ask anyone to hate their mother and father?

Well, to follow Jesus is that difficult. I am always grateful for scholars of original Hebrew and original Greek to know that the way in which this passage has been understood at different times is not only to be hyperbole, but actually to say that this is the way that we always weigh things. Something is always greater than another. How difficult is it to follow Jesus? More difficult than to give up something easy; so difficult that you might liken it to leaving your parents behind—even hating those. It is more of a comparative understanding. But in a way, that even makes it too easy for us. To be a disciple of Jesus Christ, the one who would save the world from all that keeps us from God and each other, we have to make choices that are sometimes painfully difficult.

The part of our lesson that strikes as ironic is Jesus’ likening our choosing discipleship to the internal struggle a king must fight when opting whether or not to engage in battle. Without being certain of a positive outcome in battle, a king must surely send a delegation and ask for terms of peace. This is too much what our President and we hope our Congress debate even now, along with the very strong voices of our governors and mayors in a very unusual, frightening situation. Their question is keen, and what defines a “positive outcome” in this instance may seem unclear to many of us. Still, every person is “fearfully and wonderfully made . . . hemmed in by God.” What our discipleship to Jesus asks for will never be easy. And as disciples, we are asked to view every decision through the lens of our faith in Jesus; through our trust in God. Yes, every decision, and every movement, so much that we are asked to “pick up the cross” that Jesus carried.

Back to our tree scars and shells for a moment, we might envy the mollusks their perceived insensibility to the cares of the world. Sure, they are buffeted by the wind of storms and by the sea, but we assume they don’t think about it. There is no conscious reckoning of the result of their actions, and still their exteriors are marked by their experiences. As human beings, we are marked by our experiences both inside and out. There is likely no one of us who has not known or at least has not heard of someone who has returned from battle with invisible scars. Incidences of post-traumatic stress disorder are reported at increasingly high rates among our recent veterans and first responders, and with it too many counts of suicide, and even more often with addictions to drugs and alcohol while trying to cope with the experience of conflict.

God discerns our going out and our lying down, familiar with all our ways—and with all the ways of the people of India, of Russia, of Togo and of China, of Afghanistan.

Recently, a friend shared with me that her son suffers from clinical anxiety disorder, which makes it difficult for him to engage in social activity. He had been alarmed because a friend told him that anxiety is a sin. The poor young man didn’t have worries enough without thinking this? I quickly shared with my friend that one of my favorite theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote differently. I have a feeling I may have shared this before, because I lean on it. It is not anxiety that is the sin. Anxiety causes us to sin. Worrying about things that ought to rest in God’s hands, in God’s care, causes us to sin. We act from our position of anxiety rather than from a place of trust, and so we sin. We do things out of fear and anxiety while we try to protect ourselves, and we act in ways that do not follow Jesus’ teachings when we try to go it alone. We build up walls of distrust and defense. We do it in our personal relationships, and we do it on a global scale.

We count the cost of eggs in the market, gas in the tanks, and housing for our families. We sometimes count the cost of a particular conversation as we see its effects last longer than we might have anticipated. And we count the cost of war. “**28**Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won’t you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? **29**For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, **30**saying, ‘This person began to build and wasn’t able to finish.’ **31**“Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won’t he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? **32**If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace. **33**In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.”

Doubtless among us in this congregation, we have different views on what must be a path toward peace at home and abroad. Let us remember with every word we speak, with every letter we write, and with every action we take, that each person on this earth is God’s wonderful creation, and we are called to count the cost of decisions we make, responding in faith. Amen.