Maybe you’re like me, but I have a knack for focusing in on the most expensive item in a store. I’m sure many of you, like me, have had this experience. You plan to buy something but you haven’t really calculated the true costs of this item and you gradually discover that you can’t afford to buy it. You also may end up being embarrassed when you discover it is too expensive and you can’t afford it. Maybe you try on a sport coat or dress, check the price tag and immediately return it to the rack. Or you may investigate the cost of a vacation or a condominium and you try to read the fine print, so you do not incur additional hidden costs. We are all forever trying to calculate the costs so as to avoid embarrassing situations.

We approach today’s gospel lesson from this angle—Jesus told us to count the cost of discipleship before we enter into their discipleship and discover that perhaps we cannot afford the cost of being his follower.

The opening line of the gospel lesson for today is that “great crowds followed him,” and those words always signify a problem. Whenever there are great crowds following Jesus, you immediately understand that these are not disciples. It seems that Jesus’ popularity in those times was running fairly high. That is, if you had a backache, Jesus would heal it. If you had a headache, Jesus would heal it. If you had heartache, Jesus would heal it.
Jesus was the great physician who would heal all your problems and therefore Jesus was enormously popular to the crowds. Hordes of people were joining the Jesus bandwagon.

At what point do I move from “going along with” or “following” Jesus to actually being his disciple? That is the question at the heart of this reading. These people, even the twelve, had no idea where Christ was leading them. Sure, they knew they were headed towards Jerusalem, they knew the Passover was drawing near; they had eaten their fill with leftovers, seen the miracles, and witnessed religious leaders set in their “place.” Yet, they had no idea that where Jesus was heading. Sure, they were on the road to Jerusalem – the symbol of religious power and authority – but he was leading them to the cross – the symbol of forsaking self for God.

So, despite the thousands flooding through towns and trampling over fields, Jesus turns to them with a warning. “You have no idea what lies ahead so let me tell you the cost.”

In a culture that is deeply ambivalent about personal sacrifice, and often equates it with co-dependency or some other form of emotional dysfunction, Jesus’ challenge to "carry the cross" is difficult to hear. But, then, it wasn’t any more appealing to those who first heard him 2,000 years ago either.

Quite frankly, in this passage from Luke, Jesus proposes some very troubling conditions for discipleship.
We are asked to "hate" our parents, spouse, children, siblings, even life itself. How could One who had come to bring life offer such a deadly proposal? What kind of talk is this? I mean, come on Jesus, where are your family values?

Jesus’ teaching must have surprised and confused the enthusiastic crowd (as it may for us today), it seems to have quickly thinned out the ranks of his supporters.

Centuries earlier, Moses stood with the children of Israel at the brink of crossing into the promised land and had challenged them to "choose life." Anticipating his own death, Moses instructed the Israelites in the choices that would bring them life and prosperity in a new land.

Placing the passages from Deuteronomy and Luke side by side as they are this morning, the intensity of their messages is heightened. Moses invites the people to "choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days." A vibrant relationship with God holds the promise of flourishing, prosperity and long life.

By contrast, the future Jesus offers seems hard – to follow him we must live as if we are anticipating crucifixion. Is it possible to choose life and pick up the cross?
Somehow both invitations are part of Christian discipleship. We worship a God of life, but mysteriously that life has costly sacrifice at its center.

Choosing life is not necessarily about what feels good or makes us happy. Faithful discipleship, according to Jesus, involves "hating" everything that gives us security in exchange for carrying a cross and following him.

Now it is important for us to know that Jesus is not talking about a literal hatred of family or life, but a transformed relationship to everything and everyone we depend on to define our identity. Jesus is not speaking of “hate” in an emotional sense—He is using “hate” in a Hebrew idiomatic way, calling for undivided loyalties.

Discipleship involves a way of life by which we are re-formed within a different set of loyalties. Those new commitments can break the tight hold our prior loves and connections have over how we live. Temptations to find our meaning and identity through family, self-fulfillment and possessions are strong; is very easy for all of these things to dominate our lives—especially possessions.

The challenges to choose life, discipleship and the way of the cross are ultimately about where we place our allegiance.

But choosing life is difficult, and Jesus warns us to pay attention to the cost of discipleship. Short-lived enthusiasm lacks staying power.
Counting the cost is an appropriate caution when we consider the number of people who begin important undertakings only to abandon them part way through. Whether buildings or wars, marriages or ministry projects, it is important to consider what we are getting ourselves into and the resources we can rely on.

When we count the cost and still choose the path of life and discipleship, we are able to make a steady commitment that is then sustained by our connection with the source of life.

It might be easier if we could count the cost once, make the necessary sacrifice and get it over with. But the costs of discipleship are often ongoing, and faithfulness requires a tenacity that does not give up in the face of trouble and understands sacrifice in a larger picture that is richly life-affirming. While we might prefer to make a single dramatic sacrifice as an expression of our commitment, usually the way of faithfulness involves laying down our lives in little pieces, through small decisions and unremarkable acts of kindness and generosity.

New Testament scholar, Fred Craddock speaks of the practical costs of discipleship in this way:

*We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a $1000 bill and laying it on the table—*

*“Here’s my life Lord. I’m giving it all.”*

*But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the $1000 for quarters.*

*We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Usually giving our life to Christ isn’t glorious.*
It’s done in all those little acts of love, 25 centers at a time.
It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory;
Its harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.

Craddock wants us to know
Bearing a cross has nothing to do with chronic illness,
painful physical conditions, or trying family relationships.
It is instead what we do voluntarily as a consequence of our
commitment to Jesus Christ.

But Craddock is not suggesting that we be a “little bit” Christian.
Certainly Jesus did not want a large number
of “little bit” disciples who had a “little bit” of prayer,
a “little bit” of commitment,
a “little bit” of dedication, a “little bit” of love.
Jesus didn’t want “little bit” Christians but
he wanted disciples who were truly committed to prayer,
to discipleship,
to embodying the reign of God and who would
follow him in order to transform the world.

If this is true, then we are invited to take up our cross –
that is, have our life shaped by our commitment
to the crucified messiah –
anywhere, anytime, and doing just about anything.
All of us, voters and volunteers,
bankers, stock brokers, and bus drivers,
websites managers and temp workers,
students and teachers,
mothers and fathers and parole officers –
each of us, at home or at work or at play or driving in our cars,
whenever we offer our time, talent, and labor to God,
are bearing our cross by allowing the whole of their lives
to be shaped by our commitment to Christ.
Carrying the cross is not a burden that is imposed, it is a response to Christ that is freely embraced. It is an act of discipleship—and discipleship is a choice. We have to choose to carry the cross and to do so is an active and ongoing act. We carry the cross out into the world and into every moment, every situation, and every relationship of our lives, claiming as our own the identity of Christ. What we have to imagine and remember is that the Cross stands between you and me, between you and me and every relationship we have—This means that Christ’s healing and reconciling mercy, forgiveness, gentleness, peace and justice stands between you and me and every person on this earth.

English writer, G. K. Chesterton once quipped—
*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been difficult and left untried.*

"Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple," Jesus says. It's not a threat; it's a simple fact. Carrying the cross and following Jesus is the definition of discipleship. A disciple who does not follow, that is who does not both walk the walk as well as talk the talk, is like salt that isn't salty; it's lost its essence, its very identity; it is pointless, useless. We have been given the choice to be a disciple or just join the bandwagon. If we choose discipleship, then we need to follow Jesus. And he will give us the grace and strength we need to keep on walking the walk as we talk the talk.