

## Count the Cost

Good morning again! It's great to be back with you all after my week away at General Conference. If you're unaware of what General Conference is - that's a week where pastors and lay representatives from Brethren churches like ours from all across the country and even some outside of the country come to learn together, celebrate together, worship together, and to handle business that is pertinent to our mutual interest as a larger family.

It was really an encouraging week, both for the content of the conference as well as the opportunity to connect with old friends. Lydia and I were able to take a few days away afterward to attend a friend's wedding, and I'm grateful that Jeff Parker was able to fill in for me. I heard great things about last Sunday.

This morning's sermon will be a little bit different, because I want to give a sort of update about Brethren General Conference - so as we approach scripture as God's Word for and about His redeeming work for His people in Creation, I'd like to talk about OUR particular story being lived out still today - both the story of our larger Brethren family, but also our story as the First Brethren Church in Goshen. Sound interesting? I hope so, cause I'm gonna do it anyway.

One of my favorite songs is called "Murder in the City" by a band called the Avett Brothers. The lyrics tell of a brother reflecting on his family life and encouraging his siblings not to mourn long should he happen to meet an ill fate in the city.

The last verse goes as such:

*"If I get murdered in the city, go read the letter in my desk  
Don't bother with all my belongings, just pay attention to the list...  
Make sure my sister knows I loved her, make sure my mother knows the same  
Always remember there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name"*

Always remember there was nothing worth sharing like the love that let us share our name.

It's a beautiful thought that the love shared between a husband and wife enables a family to share a name.

I want to submit to you that there is nothing more valuable in life than the love that Christ shared with us through the cross so that we all might be adopted into the family of God, all to share a name.

Many of you may not give much thought to the fact that we are a Brethren church. I've thought about it quite a lot. As part of my job prior to coming to Goshen, I would help tell the story of our Brethren Identity to pass it to the next generation of young leaders exploring a call to ministry.

I would often get the question - why does being Brethren matter? Why not just talk about being Christian? Ironically, that's the same question the early Brethren asked - and what eventually led them to reject the forms of Christianity available at the time for something more true to the scriptures and to Jesus.

In the early 1700s, all Germans were born into their religion. You were either Roman Catholic, or else you were Lutheran. Some of you here may feel like you have a similar experience because you were born into a church-going family and so your faith was somewhat determined for you at a young age.

This wasn't quite like that. Back then your parents weren't the ones making the decision of church for you - it was your prince or king. Their religious preference determined the religious practice of the entire province, and the Church acted in one accord with the State. To practice faith in any other way was tantamount to treason.

It was during this time that a group of 8 believers in Schwarzenau, Germany wrestled deeply with their faith in light of the scriptures and determined that Jesus hadn't taught that believers should be coerced into faith but that it should be a free choice of submission and repentance.

In act of civil disobedience, these 8 believers baptized each other in the Eder River - rejecting their infant baptism and effectively severing their citizenship and connection to a corrupt church so that they could embrace citizenship in the Kingdom of God.

During this and other baptism services, they would often read the following passage:

#### READING

Luke 14:<sup>25</sup> Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: <sup>26</sup> "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple. <sup>27</sup> And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

<sup>28</sup> "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? <sup>29</sup> For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, <sup>30</sup> saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

<sup>31</sup> "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? <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.

<sup>34</sup> "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? <sup>35</sup> It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; it is thrown out.

“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Luke 14 is a pivotal point in the Gospel as Jesus sets his eyes toward Jerusalem, knowing that the cross and death lies before Him. Our Lord and leader offers His last will and testament. The parables Jesus offers follow conventional enough logic - don't commit to something if you don't think you can see it through.

You wouldn't, or at least shouldn't begin a major building project if you don't have enough money and supplies to complete it. Just like you wouldn't, or at least shouldn't, begin a military campaign if you don't think there is a reasonable chance of winning.

Will His followers be willing to inherit and accept the same fate that awaits Him? Because the only way to inherit life - TRUE LIFE - is to confront the grave and give up everything.

Jesus says, don't follow me unless you are willing to die to yourself completely. You must count the cost...

Brethren are no strangers to counting the cost. We get our very name because the first in our movement called each other brothers and sisters, baptized into a new family in God's kingdom, sometimes with the result of their blood relatives disowning them. To be Brethren was - and is - to follow Jesus no matter the cost.

That's why this passage is a popular one to read before our baptism services. In baptism, we follow Jesus' example of humility and submission as we make the conscious choice to be immersed underwater as a symbol dying to self with Jesus and rising with Him into new life.

I. WE ARE A PEOPLE OF RADICAL OBEDIENCE (verse 25-33).

WE ARE A PEOPLE OF RADICAL OBEDIENCE.

My friend Maru showed me a great song the other day called “Jesus Es Verbo No Sustantivo” - Jesus is a verb, not a noun.

We don't just believe in Jesus as an idea - he's our Lord and we're meant to live like him!

We have always sought to obey scripture in its plain sense, even when it's difficult or uncomfortable.

- We take Jesus at his word when during the last supper he instructed the disciples to follow his example - so we not only share the bread and the cup, we share a full meal, and we even practice washing one another's feet just as he washed the disciples' feet.
- In baptism, we baptize 3 times forward in a practice called Trine immersion, because the early Brethren weren't content to do things according to Church tradition. Instead, they

studied the Gospels and the earliest accounts and teachings of the first disciples and found that 3 times forward was the way that they did it. That drive to do things as close to Jesus witness as possible is also why - as far as is reasonable - we baptize in living or running water, like a river, because that's what Jesus did.

There's an interesting story about our own church's beginnings in March of 1897. Goshen First Brethren Church was first organized out of a group of Brethren believers who had been in the area for 5 or so years and a young preacher named C.F. Yoder who began preaching in the Elkhart county area while attending the University of Chicago.

Yoder was 23 (even younger than me) on the night that he first preached in Goshen. After their evening service, some 50 individuals were baptized in the river... Now, the baptisms were AFTER the evening services and remember, it was March...in Indiana...which meant that it was COLD. When Yoder was later remembering the event, he described the river as swift, swollen, and filled with floating ice!

But just like those early Brethren in Germany, the first members of our congregation were committed to a life of radical obedience.

Where many other denominations and faith traditions are struggling over doctrinal issues, most Brethren churches are simply worried about trying our best to live the Bible. Let's work on the Greatest Commandment first - loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength - and then we can worry about arguing over the rest.

## II. WE ARE A PEOPLE OF TETHERED FREEDOM (verse 35b).

That posture toward the Word of God is essentially what is behind Jesus' statement - "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus often taught in parables, and this phrase was his usual invitation for listeners to really wrestle with the meaning of his teaching. If you remember the parable of the Sower, Jesus teaches that those who hear God's Word can fall into several categories:

1. Some hear and reject it because they don't understand it.
2. Some understand and receive it joyfully, but they don't really let it change their life to the core, and so it eventually withers away.
3. Some receive it, but they let the cares and worries of their life choke out the joy.
4. But Some, a precious few, will hear, understand, and treasure God's Word - constantly returning to it for reflection and deeper understanding so that it will nourish them.

One of the things that makes Brethren unique as Christ-followers is that we call ourselves - non-creedal. We don't have creeds or belief statements that we make people sign and repeat every week. Instead, we say that if we have any creed, it's just the Bible itself.

We come to the Bible day-after-day, generation-after-generation as our source of Truth.

You may have heard the statement that we believe in the Bible, the Whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible.

That is to say that the Bible, and nothing else, is our best authoritative witness of God's Word made manifest in Jesus and illumined by the Holy Spirit. Not the Apostles Creed. Not any belief statement or systematic set of beliefs.

The Bible as God's Word does not change, but the circumstances of our age and culture do AND our growing understanding of language and context constantly adds new shades of meaning to our understanding of God's Word in the Bible. So we believe EVERY GENERATION has a responsibility to submit to scripture and interpret freshly in their world.

That's why we say WE ARE A PEOPLE OF TETHERED FREEDOM. There is freedom of thought and new expression, but we are ruthlessly committed to the Word of God.

This has been a particular strength for us as a movement as we recently went through the process of discussing and ultimately accepting a statement on Brethren Positions on Social Issues of our day. This was accepted formally at last year's conference and updated this year.

This document covers a range of topics including Addictions, Consumerism, Life and Death Issues, Immigration, Poverty/Racial Inequality, Sexuality, Creation Care, and War.

I want to say a few things about this document and the whole process and conversation around it for the last few years that I believe is both interesting and encouraging for us:

1. First, it's a really helpful resource, primarily because of the WAY that it's written. It's not meant to be a series of short statements dictating what we HAVE to believe on any specific social issue. Instead, for each focus area it offers Biblical foundation, historical considerations, some cultural reflections, and finally some wisdom for life application.
  - a. This is important because for many of these issues our world is currently living with realities that are just not addressed in the same way when the Bible was originally written. But the Bible DOES talk about issues that address the root of our current concerns.
  - b. Rather than telling you what to believe, this resource consistently points us back to the Bible to wrestle with these issues in conversation together as a community submitting to the Word of God.
2. Second, I've been impressed by the WAY it's caused our people to talk better about the intersection of faith and culture.

- a. There are a lot of folks who disagree with parts of the statements made. Some feel like it says too much in areas, some like it doesn't say enough. People don't all agree, and that's fine.
- b. There was actually a bit of tension during our final business session as we discussed the document. Honestly, I was a bit miffed about it, not because there was conflict, but because folks felt overly uncomfortable about the conflict. [Does that sound familiar to you?] If you ever feel tension rising in a church meeting and you want to run and hide - you might be a Brethren.
- c. Following that brief bit of tension, folks kept going out of their way to address it and call for unity and prayer. Yeah, sure let's pray, but was it really that big of a deal? And then I remembered why I love this movement so much. While other folks fight and split over positions on social issues, we're committed to unity and love for one another while we have the conversations.

One of our fellow Brethren Pastors Rich Hagopian later said it well when we said, "I don't want my love for the Brethren to be a fiction that I maintain...but it will be at some point, if I'm not able to really stand and say, Here I stand and I can do no other."

In other words - Unity and Christian love ACTUALLY matter, and so we ought to have the difficult conversations with one another to understand and appreciate different points of view so that we can all grow together in knowledge of the truth. Otherwise, our love for each other is just a fiction.

There's a lot of talk about tolerance in the world. But when we actually live into our identity as Brothers and Sisters in God's family, we go WAY beyond tolerance. We love one another unceasingly. We embrace the freedom and grace of Christ for one another, allowing for there to be differences of opinion and perspective.

But we also mutually hold each other accountable to scripture because it matters...and we say, but wait, doesn't it say? If we're to be faithful, shouldn't we be doing...?

We are a people of Radical Obedience and a freedom Tethered to God's Word.

AND WE ARE A PEOPLE OF PECULIAR HOPE.

III. WE ARE A PEOPLE OF PECULIAR HOPE (verse 34-35).

As He journeys toward the cross, Jesus reminds those who would follow Him that to follow Him means embracing the possibility of death.

As followers of Jesus, we are able to embrace that possibility and give up everything because we have been given an ultimate hope. We sit down, count the cost, and choose to give our time,

money, reputation, relationships, even our very lives, because we know that in the end we will reap a life that is truly life.

Because of that hope, we've got congregations all over the country who are facing the hard questions about what faithfulness means for them in the current moment.

- We've got congregations that are waning and dying. Some are holding on as long as possible. Others are finding ways to cast new vision and hope for the future. Some are finding creative ways to pay their resources forward to bless new expressions of church with buildings and/or start-up funding.
- We also have congregations that are reimagining what it means to love their neighbors well.
  - ◆ Radial Church in Canton, OH has been working with their guatemalan neighbors in the midst of some difficult issues with immigration policies. There was a recent ICE raid that ended up with tons of legal immigrants being detained simply because of the color of their skin. A group from Radial has been working with their neighbors to provide counsel, support, as well as translation and legal services for other neighbors who are trying to make sure they navigate the system well.
  - ◆ In Columbus OH, ChristCore Brethren Church is reaching out to folks in the heavy metal scene who have often been spurned and wounded by church people.
  - ◆ Manteca Brethren, out in California, is finding creative ways to partner with other churches and non-profits in their community to provide affordable housing for the homeless in their community.
  - ◆ Right here in Indiana, South Bend First Brethren regularly takes time during their SS hour to go out and serve their community.
- Some of you may be hearing all that and saying - Oh man, that sounds exciting, but we could never do anything that impressive. We're too small, and we've been through so much. 2 things:
  - ◆ Most of those congregations are actually smaller than our own.
  - ◆ We're already doing that much and more! For years we've been running a thrift store providing incredibly cheap goods for our community and giving ALL the proceeds away to benefit non-profits. We also have several individuals in our congregation that take it upon themselves to go and provide handyman services to folks who otherwise couldn't afford it...I'm not talking about changing a light-bulb - I'm talking about building a porch!

We do it and others don't hear about it because we're a people that take it seriously when Jesus says to give generously and not to seek the spotlight.

Because it's in our DNA to be radically obedient and creative with our service, because of this wonderful hope that is within us.

Sometimes those stories need to be shared so that we can encourage each other because of what God is doing in and through our church family.

Truthfully, I would love to have more of us go to conference next summer, just because I want other people to get to know you all and be as encouraged by your faithfulness as I have been after getting to know you for 9-10 months.

## CONCLUSION

I was humbled to be invited on stage during the conference to be a part of a panel discussing the future of our Brethren Movement. To be honest, I felt like most of the time I was stumbling through answers and trying to sound intelligent when really I had no idea what I was talking about.

The only thing I had to say that I thought was worthwhile at all was pretty much just that I had no idea what the future of our movement held.

As I'd been reflecting on the question leading up to the night, I just kept thinking of my two kids and how I'll often dream and wonder about what they'll be like when they grow up - what interests will they have? What will they want to be and do with their lives? I like to joke that Deacon is going to run off and join the circus since he seems to be such a Daredevil at home.

The truth is, I have no idea the future holds for them. I don't even know what the world is going to look like in 20 years, much less how they'll fit into it.

The best I can hope for is to instill in them a deep love for Jesus and the wisdom necessary to channel their passions into some creative way to embrace God's Kingdom in whatever circumstance they find themselves in.

That's the same hope and vision that I have for our Brethren movement as a whole, and it's the same hope and vision that I have for this congregation.

I don't know what the future looks like for us. From what I've heard, this community has changed a ton in just the last decade or so. It's difficult to say what it will look like 5-10 years from now.

What I do know is that Jesus has extended an invitation for us to live sacrificially, to lay down our comfort and engage the world with the Gospel no matter what it means for us.

Have you counted the cost? Are you in?

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.  
Let us pray.