

# Batter Up!

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Luke 14:25-33**

*Jesus is still on the road, making his final journey, to Jerusalem. And he's not alone.*

Big crowds were journeying with [Jesus], and he turned and said to them, “Anyone who comes to me and doesn’t hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life can’t be my disciple! And whoever doesn’t carry his own cross and come along behind me can’t be my disciple!

“If one of you wants to build a tower, doesn’t he sit down first and figure out what it’ll cost, and if he has enough to finish it? Otherwise, when he lays the foundation but can’t finish [the project], everyone who notices will start making fun of him. They’ll say, ‘This guy started a building project, but couldn’t finish it.’

“Or what king will go to war against another king, without sitting down first to figure out if he can oppose with ten thousand the one who’s coming against him with more than twenty thousand? And if not, then while the other is still at some distance, he’ll send a delegation to negotiate peace.

“So then, every one of you who doesn’t forsake all of his own possessions can’t be my disciple.”

## **Children’s Story**

When Kendra Kerbunkle was six years old, she took swimming lessons for the first time. It was hard, and she wasn’t very good at it. She wanted to quit. But her mom wouldn’t let her.

She said, “Kendra, you keep going to your swimming lessons. You keep trying. You keep learning and practicing all you can. You’ll probably never swim in the Olympics, but you’ll be able to swim from one end of a swimming pool to the other.”

So Kendra kept going to her swimming lessons all that summer. And the next summer. And the summer after that. She also took swimming lessons in grade school. And she took swimming lessons in high school.

Kendra wasn’t the best swimmer in the world. But she swam anyway, as often as she could.

She swam in the summer. She swam in the winter. She swam when she was in college. She swam when she started working. She swam when she got married. She swam when she had children. She swam when she became a grandmother.

Kendra Kerbunkle is 67 years old now, and she still swims. She’ll never swim in the Olympics. But she swims anyway, as often as she can. I don’t think she’ll ever stop.

## **Sermon**

My brief little league career was hardly the proudest moment of my life.

I say “moment” because it was a short story.

It was the late 1960s. All the guys from the neighborhood were signing up for little league. So I did, too. My brother, who was two years older than I, played little league. He did all right. And my cousin Johnny? He was a superstar. He was a catcher, a pitcher, and a power hitter. So I signed up. In addition, the 1967 Boston Red Sox had provided an agony that energized all of us over baseball. So I signed up. Plus they promised us uniforms and a parade. So I signed up.

Again, it was a short story.

The uniforms? Some of them were crisp and new. Mine was old and ratty. The parade? It was lackluster. We were not heroes with an adoring public. The batting helmet? I've never found a hat too big for my head, but that batting helmet was huge. I could barely see out of it. The bat? It was too heavy. I could barely swing it. The pitcher? He was too good. Three pitches made three strikes. I was out. So I quit. My little league career was over.

I don't remember what the coach said. You'd think it would have been something like, "Don't quit. Stick with it!" That's what a good coach says — unless you're really lousy. Hmm?

**In today's gospel reading, Jesus doesn't sound like a very good coach.** Instead of encouraging people to stick with him, instead of encouraging people to keep following him, he actually discouraged people. In multiple ways, he warned them off from following him.

By this time, it was like a parade all around Jesus. There were big crowds, Luke tells us, and Jesus was at the center. The great Passover festival was coming. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He wasn't going in a straight line, but the destination was clear. And the crowds joined him, a party of pilgrims on their way to the holy city.

But Jesus knew better. This was no party. This was no pilgrimage. This was a death-march to Jerusalem — Jesus' death, and perhaps the deaths of those who got too close to him. So Jesus said to the crowds again and again, "Are you sure you want to do this?" He tried to warn them off.

**Listen to what Jesus had to say to them all.** *Anyone who comes to me and doesn't hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life can't be my disciple!* (v. 26). "Think of every person you love," Jesus says. "They move to last place, behind the kingdom. They move to last place, behind me. And don't even think about your own place." It's not about hatred, as we understand it. It's not about hostility toward loved ones, or rejection of them. It's a warning, a warning that the gospel turns family values upside down, that discipleship — your relationship to Christ and to the kingdom — redefines every other relationship you have, even the relationship you have to your own self.

Jesus says, *Whoever doesn't carry his own cross and come along behind me can't be my disciple!* (v. 27). We're proud of the cross. We adorn our buildings, our bumpers, and our bodies with the cross. And if someone suggested that we remove the large cross from the front wall of this room, I imagine most of us would oppose it. We're proud of the cross. But the cross was a symbol of shame. In the Roman Empire, the cross was the ultimate insult. It was a sign of complete rejection. To carry a cross was like dressing in red and waving a Soviet flag in front of Joe McCarthy or Ronald Reagan. To carry a cross was like wearing an "I'm for Osama" t-shirt to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. "Carry your own cross," Jesus says. That's another warning to would-be disciples: "Prepare to be despised and rejected. Prepare to be cursed by your own people. Prepare to be stomped on by the powers."

Jesus says, *If one of you wants to build a tower, doesn't he sit down first and figure out what it'll cost, and if he has enough to finish it? . . . Or what king will go to war against another king, without sitting down first to figure out if he can oppose with ten thousand the one who's coming against him with more than twenty thousand?* (vv. 28,31). In other words, "Are you sure you have what it takes to do this? What makes you think you have what it takes to do this?" Peter thought he had what it takes. "I will follow you even to death," Peter boasted. But we all know what happened in the courtyard that Thursday night. "Do you have any idea what it will cost to follow me?" Jesus asks. "Do you have any idea what you will be up against if you follow me?" Once again it's a warning, a warning to would-be disciples.

Then there's this: *Every one of you who doesn't forsake all of his own possessions can't be my disciple* (v. 33). In other words, Jesus says, "You'll have no home to hide in. You'll have no room to rest in. You'll have no couch to collapse on. There will be no resting, there will be no stopping, until the journey ends." There's no comfort in following in Jesus. There's no comfort in being his disciple —

except the comfort of belonging to him “body and soul, in life and in death.” And to hear Jesus tell it, discipleship does have about it the aroma of death — yet another warning.

What a lousy coach Jesus is! All he does is discourage us from following him.

**But here’s what troubles me: Does that matter to us?** A ministry colleague of mine put it this way: “Who of us wants to be a disciple? We want to be Christian,” she said. “We want to be a child of God. We want to be saved (even if we’re not comfortable with that stark language). But, do we want to be disciples?”

Jesus wants delvers not dabblers. As another colleague put it, he wants followers not fans. In other words, Jesus wants disciples. He wants people who count the cost and pay the cost to follow him. He wants people who redefine themselves and who redefine every connection and every relationship around Jesus. He wants people who are comfortable with being uncomfortable and content with being discontented — for his sake.

But who of us wants to be a disciple? Especially when the costs are so personal? I just noticed that this morning. Hate your own father and mother. Hate your own life. Carry your own cross. Forsake your own possessions. It’s all so personal and individual. Intensely personal decision (actually, a lifetime of decisions) and discipline are indispensable details of discipleship. So, who of us wants to be a disciple?

I do. I want to be a disciple. I guess. But by this time in my life, I’m pretty sure I don’t have what it takes. I don’t have the desire and the devotion and the discipline to be a disciple. I don’t have the tenacity and the trust to be a disciple. I don’t have the faith, the hope, and the love to be a disciple. Almost thirty years ago, I started building a tower. I had no idea what it would cost. I just started building. (Had I known what it would cost, I might never have started!) That tower remains unfinished. Progress has been embarrassingly slow. My only hope? To send a delegation and negotiate peace. My only hope? To trust not my discipline, not my tenacity, not my love, but Christ’s. My only hope? Saying, “Lord, have mercy.” Saying, “Lord, I believe; help me with my unbelief.” Saying, “Lord, nurture my faith and devotion at your Table.”

**Then there’s one last thing for me to do.** To put on that ratty uniform, to take up that bat, and to keep playing the game. And to do it with my eyes open so that, when I tip up the visor on that oversized batting helmet, I don’t see a crowd of beer-swilling, nacho-chomping fans daring me to swing, but instead a great cloud of witnesses, who wore the same uniform and held the same bat, who, regardless of their skill, stayed in the game, and who, by the grace of God, were disciples.