

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

September 4, 2022

Cost of Living

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

I suspect you've heard the phrase "cost of living" a time or two recently. This should come as no surprise given rising inflation rates, declining population trends, increasing wealth inequality, and a looming recession. I know I have heard people talking about the "cost of living" more than I remember the topic being discussed in the past. But have you ever slowed down to really examine what that phrase is saying about our world?

The phrase itself lays out the reality that humans must pay a price in order simply to live. Now, this isn't anything new; there have always been requirements (or costs) to living. But for much of humanity's existence those costs have largely been paid directly in time and energy. For much of our history humanity has needed to invest directly in procuring food, securing safe water, and building a shelter in which to live. This describes the most basic cost of living.

As our standards of living have risen, so too have the costs. And not only have costs risen, but we've changed how we pay our costs. For the most part we no longer have a direct relationship with finding shelter, water, and food. Instead, we now have money, which is a representation of the labor we have expended, little slices of our time/energy/life force that we exchange for the things we need in order to live. I worry that our indirect relationship with paying the "cost of living" has made too many of us comfortable with where our systems have brought us.

In our current system what happens if someone cannot pay the "cost of living"? Can they seek to build their own shelter and gain access to safe water as well as opportunities to raise their own food? Perhaps in some places...but how about here in Williamsburg? If someone in our community cannot pay the "cost of living" what do you imagine happens to them?

Eviction? Homelessness? Hunger? Unemployment? Ill health? Malnutrition? Unfortunately, statistics suggest all the above.¹

So, we have created an indirect system wherein the “cost of living” cannot be paid by everyone and those who cannot pay it are made to suffer...making their ability to pay the cost that much harder. This becomes a question of existence then. And our current system seems to want poor people to simply not exist anymore. We see localities around the country passing laws criminalizing camping on public land; towns and cities are installing anti-homeless benches in parks and arresting people trying to feed the hungry poor. So not only is the cost of living getting higher and higher, but the punishments for not being able to pay the costs are getting worse. And because of our indirect systems, we generally do not allow people to directly invest in supplying their own needs.

According to a 2019 report from the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition, a person experiencing homelessness in America is 11 times more likely to end up in prison than those who have a home.² This is the system we live in...the “cost of living” has been weaponized against people and more and more if someone cannot pay it, they end up in prison. By the way, did you know roughly \$2 billion worth of goods is produced in America by prison labor every year? And that the highest wage earned by prisoners in US prisons is 35 cents an hour (though 9 states pay prisoners nothing for their labor). What a system, huh? Criminalize poverty and thereby fill prisons with poor people who couldn’t afford the “cost of living” (the US has the highest incarceration rate in the developed world³), then exploit their labor once they’re in prison. Our broken human system has created a reality in which if you cannot pay the cost of living then either you don’t get to live or your living is subject to another person’s power over you.

Uh...Pastor Jon...you haven’t mentioned the Gospel or Jesus yet...and you’re starting to depress me! Don’t worry, I’m about to bring in our Gospel text for today! You see, in our text today, Jesus is talking about costs too. He talks about a builders need to plan for the cost of building a tower and a king’s need to consider the costs of military action against his neighbor. But really, he’s talking about the cost of being a follower of the Way of Christ. And

¹c.f. <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/root-causes-of-homelessness/>, <https://nationalhomeless.org/about-homelessness/>, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK218240/>
²<https://www.texascjc.org/system/files/publications/Return%20to%20Nowhere%20The%20Revolving%20Door%20Between%20Incarceration%20and%20Homelessness.pdf>
³ <https://www.aclu.org/news/human-rights/captive-labor-exploitation-of-incarcerated-workers>

the cost here is remarkably different from the costs we're used to thinking about.

The biggest cost the Way of Christ requires...in the end...is your life. But this cost is not paid in the ways that we pay the "cost of living," rather it is paid in obedience and service to the will of God. And not only is the payment different, but the reward is very different as well. Obedience and service to the will of God leads us to connection, community, inclusion, and equality. The kingdom of God is where the "cost of living" means taking care of one another, loving one another, and seeing to the needs of our neighbors.

In this regard the cost of our living in Christ is to help others pay their costs. Jesus is, once again, turning the system upside down. Rather than a system of debt and indebtedness, the kingdom of God focuses on our freedom to forgive debts, share costs, and live in connected community. Living in the kingdom of God means understanding that the only debt that matters is our debt to God, the only cost we need to pay is the cost God seeks – do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God – love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. That is the cost that Christ paid and the cost his followers are called to pay as well.

What do you think Jesus meant when he taught us to pray: "forgive us our debts as we forgive the debts of others"⁴? And yes, in Matthew's use of the Greek the most literal translation is debts as opposed to sins or trespasses⁵ (Luke's Greek use differs from Matthew). Or why do you think we hear Jesus talk so often about providing for the poor in his preaching and teaching?⁶ What do you imagine Jesus would want us to do with the possessions he encourages us to give up at the end of our Gospel reading today? What do you think Jesus meant when he said his mission included bringing "good news to the poor"⁷?

The cost of living in the kingdom of God is a very high cost. It means giving ourselves away for the sake of our neighbor's costs. It means pointing out the ways in which humanity is failing to live out the divine call we have to care for one another and see to one another's needs. And pursuing the kingdom of

⁴ Matthew 6:12 (NRSV)

⁵ "ὀφείλημα." THAYER'S GREEK LEXICON, Electronic Database. Copyright © 2002, 2003, 2006, 2011 by Biblesoft, Inc.

⁶ c.f. Matthew 19:21, Matthew 25:31-46, Mark 10:21, Luke 4:18, 6:10, 18:22, 19:8

⁷ Luke 4:18 (NRSV)

God, pointing out the brokenness within ourselves and within our systems will lead to another cost...the cost of conflict.

Following the Way of Christ will put us at odds with our culture at times, with our society at times, with our neighbors at times, even with our friends and family at times. That is another part of giving up our lives for the Gospel, another part of picking up our crosses and following Jesus. This is the cost of discipleship, the cost of living in the kingdom of God, the cost of true life. Serving others. Helping others. Loving others. Valuing the needs of others just as much as we value our own needs. Pursuing God's will for the world over and against our own; over and against humanity's collective will, the will that has led to our current systems. Those other wills aren't going to like it, and conflict results.

As usual, Jesus is pointing out how backwards our systems are and inviting us into the mirrorwork that would make changing them possible. Being who God created us to be would mean that we would not seek to get others indebted to us, we would not seek that power over our neighbors. Being who God created us to be would mean seeing the value and dignity in every person, seeing the image of God in one another. And out of that perception, perhaps the cost of living...true living, could be paid.

The cost of living in our broken system is too high for many of our neighbors. Heck, it's too high for many of us and leaves us feeling trapped and hopeless! The cost of living in the kingdom of God is also high, but Christ paid it first and God's grace means that even when we can't pay it ourselves, we can pay it together. And that's the ultimate point of the kingdom of God, at least how I understand Christ's teaching on it. The kingdom of God is about mutuality, connection, and community. The cost of living the Way of Christ is very high, but we pay it together, we pay it with one another...and with Jesus. We pay it by simply seeking God's will and not the world's. Jesus invites us into the cross-carrying work with him. Jesus shows us the Way...the Way that, if we pursue it, if we pay the cost for it, leads to life...life eternal and life abundant...**for all!** Amen.