

**The Green Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, September 7, 2025 – Table Copy**

**SILENT PREPARATION**

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” — Matthew 7:12-14

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Most Gracious God, Creator of all that is and ever will be:

From the dust of the ground,  
you have made us in your image.

Now, shape and fashion us once again,  
through the reading and hearing of Holy Scripture, that –  
like clay molded by the skilled hands of the Potter –  
we might be formed into vessels fit for use,  
to the glory of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**FIRST SCRIPTURE READING**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

*Our first reading comes from Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Law.  
The book of Deuteronomy consists of Moses' three final sermons;  
in our passage, Moses challenges the Children of Israel.  
He sets before them the choice between obedience to God - which gives life,  
or going their own way – to serve false gods....*

"See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.  
If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God –  
that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God,  
walking in his ways, and observing his commandments,  
decrees, and ordinances,  
then you shall live and become numerous,  
and the LORD your God will bless you  
in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear,  
but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,  
I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish;  
you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan  
to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today:  
that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

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,  
so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give –  
to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING

Luke 14:25-33

*As we continue in Year C of our cycle of readings,  
our Gospel passage again comes from Luke.  
Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem, and both his fame –  
and the adverse reaction of the religious authorities – are increasing....*

Now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned, and said to them,  
"Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother,  
wife and children, brothers and sisters,  
yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not carry the cross – and follow me – cannot be my disciple.

For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down  
and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it?

Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish,  
all who see it will begin to ridicule him,  
saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.'

Or what king, going out to wage war against another king,  
will not sit down first and consider whether he is able –  
with ten thousand –  
to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand?

If he cannot, then – while the other is still far away –  
he sends a delegation, and asks for the terms of peace.

So – therefore – none of you can become my disciple...  
if you do not give up all your possessions."

**SERMON**

“The Three ‘C’s of Crowd Thining”

As our reading indicates, Jesus knew how to gather a crowd.

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The Gospel of Luke portrays him as a magnetic presence,  
and large groups of people were drawn to his teaching.

No doubt some scratched their heads –  
when they heard one of his parables –  
and then laughed out loud, when they finally got the point.

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People with physical and emotional needs leaned forward –  
to experience his healing touch.

Then – when their lives were changed – they told others about it,  
and the word spread quickly.

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So, it is no wonder that Luke tells us that crowds traveled with Jesus.

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They stuck to him. Wherever he went, they went.  
And, the mass of people was enormous;  
at times, almost impossible to estimate.

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Perhaps some clung to him because of the parables Jesus told –  
right before today’s account.

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He had been invited for dinner.

And – at the table – he declared that – next time –  
the host should expand the guest list.

That is, a meal should never be limited to those who might return the invitation.  
A truly gracious meal is inclusive.  
Therefore, invite those who could never return the favor.

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He then expanded on this point,  
by imagining a huge dinner – offered to many.

Those invited – however – shrugged off the invitation –  
with many, obviously lame – excuses.

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So, the host of the banquet directed his servants to invite in all –  
people who could never dream of attending such a feast.

Then – when he discovered that there were empty seats –  
he commanded the servants to go into the streets,  
and round up whoever they could find.

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The gracious host’s generosity knew no bounds.  
He wanted a crowd, a full house!

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But – on the other hand –  
he was not at all sympathetic to those who had refused his invitation:

We overhear the banquet host – referring to those originally invited –  
snarl – out of the side of his mouth:  
“None of those invited will taste my dinner.”

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Do you detect a touch of sarcasm.  
Or judgment. Or veiled pain. Or pure honesty.

But – whatever it is – it sets up the story we heard in today’s text.

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Followed by growing crowds,  
Jesus spun around to address them all.

They had been sticking to him like Velcro,  
and all were welcome to follow him.  
All were invited by the grace of God’s kingdom.  
And all were free to go – wherever Jesus went.

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But that did not mean that everybody – who was attracted to Jesus –  
would finish the journey with him.

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And – so – he listed three aspects of true discipleship,  
aspects that would – most likely – thin the crowd.

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The first was clarity of purpose and mission.

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This first thing he said is drastic. Want to follow me?  
Hate your parents, your spouse and children,  
your extended relations, even your own life.

That certainly sounds harsh.  
It is one of the fiercest sayings he ever uttered –  
at least among his words, as recorded in the Gospels.

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And – if we didn't know better –  
we might think this was a rejoinder to fuel family tension.

A teenager may explode – when given a clear curfew.

A future bride may despise her father –  
if he rejects her choice of a husband.

A household torn asunder by alcohol abuse — or its intervention —  
may never mend.

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Pain begets pain. Words screamed become scars. Loved ones are despised.  
Shouldn't the followers of Jesus be concerned about peace –  
especially in their own families?

Yes, of course. But this is not that text.

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Scholars tell us this is a particular form of speech –  
commonly used in Semitic cultures.

It is “either-or” language –  
just like when Jesus said we cannot worship God and wealth. (Luke 16:13)

“No slave can serve two masters,  
for a slave will either hate the one and love the other,  
or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”

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Here – then – the distinction was between God or family.  
We cannot give both ultimate honor.

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As commentator G. B. Caird noted,  
“For followers of Jesus, to hate their families  
meant giving the family second place in their affections.”

God’s dominion comes first, and that is a hard choice.  
And – for some – it is the cross they bear.

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Indeed – if we surveyed the sanctuary today –  
some of us may be struggling with that decision.

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Some may hear Christ calling them to stand up for a cause –  
one that their own brothers and sisters resist.

Others may feel a tug to make a life change –  
that family members will just not understand.

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When a person senses God’s call –  
to pursue a new direction, or a deeper expression of faith –  
those most resistant to that call  
may be sitting around the same dinner table.

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As the renown preacher Fred Craddock often quipped,  
“The Holy Spirit rarely calls someone in a voice loud enough  
for the whole family to hear.”

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The point – simply put – is this:  
The call of Christ comes before everything else.

Whether we choose to follow him – or he chooses us –  
discipleship is a matter of increasing clarity of priority:  
We follow Jesus first.

His invitation precedes our own willful wishes.

His values come before our own.

Everybody – and everything else – must line up after him.

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Secondly, Jesus declared the cost: the price tag of discipleship

Jesus reminded his hearers that this clarity –  
this acceptance of the Divine mission – comes with a cost.

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At some points, the discipleship road may be steep.

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A disciple may be blessed – for a season – to find the path level,  
perhaps even refreshing.

Yet, discipleship always demands something –  
by putting Christ first, other matters must be put aside.

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Sometimes, a few excited converts may make a show of this –  
declaring how much they have sacrificed –  
for their faith and obedience.

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The fervent college student deletes the hardcore rock-and-roll from his iPod –  
announcing how sanctified he has become.

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The modest office worker – who never sinned extravagantly –  
convinces herself that a lack of social life is a spiritual discipline.

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There may be little transformation in these souls.

At most, they might have experienced a slight recalibration of the spirit.

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Far more stirring, are the quiet sacrifices that some make –  
in leading lives of faithfulness.

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There is the divorced engineer –  
who passes up lucrative opportunities for relocation –  
because she values the stability she provides for her children  
by staying in their small town.

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Or, there is a dentist – who takes two weeks of unpaid personal time  
to fix smiles in an under-served city.

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A retired teacher tells her pastor that she won't be in worship most Sundays –  
because the nearby soup kitchen can't find anybody else  
to prepare meals on that morning.

“That's where God wants me to be,” she announces,  
adding, “I meet Jesus in the breadline every week.”

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This is where discipleship hits the road –  
in acts of service that benefit other people.

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Each act requires a calculation of energy and effort–  
in other words, counting the cost.

And helping others – in the name of Christ – is never a quick fix.  
It takes discipline, and perseverance.

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Not only do we discern the work – we clarify the mission – but we see it through.

If we volunteer to work with teenagers, they count on us to keep showing up.

If we dedicate our time each week – to sit with a lonely friend,  
it does no good to allow interruptions in that schedule.

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There is a cost.

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The third aspect of discipleship is Commitment –  
which involves giving it all away

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When clarity is gained – and the cost calculated –  
we discover one of the paradoxical secrets of the Christian life.

That is, there is a surprising liberation that comes,  
as we follow Christ by offering our lives to others.

We can travel lightly – not needing luxuries.  
God sets us free from our own base desires.

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This was the lesson learned by the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer,  
as he committed his energy to living the Gospel,  
during the most demanding times.

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In his extraordinary book, *The Cost of Discipleship*,  
he writes of the unfolding journey of following Christ –  
and its ultimate consequence:

Where will the call to discipleship lead those who follow it?  
What decisions and painful separations will it entail?  
We must take this question to him who alone knows the answer.  
Only Jesus Christ, who bids us follow him,  
knows where the path will lead.  
But we know that it will be a path full of mercy beyond measure.  
Discipleship is joy.

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Joy. That is the secret.

Not happiness, nor freedom from struggle,  
but the sense that our lives have aligned with the purposes of God –  
in Jesus Christ.

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In giving ourselves away – for the sake of God’s kingdom,  
we gain a clearer sense of who we are.

We see what God is doing, and how we can be a part of it.

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This is the true significance of being Christ’s disciple:  
In the best – and deepest – sense:  
We lose ourselves...and gain the Savior.

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The crowds will not always understand the call of discipleship.  
Nor will they follow through to the end.

Jesus knew this, but – nevertheless –  
he invites all to live the life of God’s dominion.

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Well – to be sure – the crowd often thins out –  
as its members gradually perceive what living that life requires.

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But we know what it will take,  
for his voice is uniquely calling each one of us.

And – with increasing clarity, a counting of the cost,  
and a deepening commitment –  
each of us is invited to respond to Christ's self-giving love –  
by offering ourselves to him, and his purposes.

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We come to Christ with nothing in our hands.

Why?

Because it is easier to embrace him when we are longer clinging to anything else.

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**In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Amen.**

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## **CHARGE AND BENEDICTION**

The invitation to follow Christ requires clarity about his lordship,  
a calculation of the cost of what he requires of us,  
and a commitment to follow him.

But, the eternal sum of those three C's is joy!

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....