**April 3rd – ‘Moving Forward: A costly choice.’**  (Philippians 3:4-14. John 12:1-8)

I like to think of myself as someone who is good at making decisions.

My husband will tell you, that I like to carefully research things. If we are going on vacation for example, I meticulously plan, I plot the route, I book things ahead, I even schedule the days when we will do all the various activities.

It’s not that I’m not spontaneous – but more that I like to be organized!

But I have learned, that sometimes in life we have to let go of all the best laid plans, and just listen to God’s Spirit calling us.

And that can often be a very hard thing to do!

10 years ago, I remember meeting with my bank manager – and in my organized way, I laid out the best plan to have my mortgage paid off in 10 years. I was on a good salary in education as a senior teacher and supply Vice Principal. I even had plans so that I could retire early at maybe 60, and perhaps get that place somewhere down south in warmer climates. As a family we even went to Dominican Republic to check out vacation real estate.

But then, I heard God calling me!

I’ll be honest – I did not plan to go into ministry.

It’s not like I did my undergrad in theology, then when straight into seminary.

No, I worked in theatre, and education, and in storytelling!

If you had told me 10 years ago that I would be a full-time minister – I would have laughed at you – and told you about my plan to retire early, and to lay on a beach in the winters.

But listening to God’s call to discipleship - can sometimes be at great cost.

And perhaps that is because we sometimes put value in the wrong things – like paying off the mortgage, or expensive vacations, or our financial investments.

But really, the greatest reward is to follow God’s Spirit at whatever the cost!

Sometimes that cost is great, and it does require us to sacrifice to our human plans, our priorities, and the way that we have been living our lives.

The apostle Paul realized that.

He was a very learned man – a Pharisee even!

He had a deep understanding of the Hebrew scriptures and the Jewish law, and he had earned the respect of those around him.

He was a devout Jew – who observed every law.

He describes himself as the “Hebrews of Hebrews” (Philippians 3: 5)

He believed these Jesus followers threatened his beloved Torah – and he was intent on eradicating them; he is often described as ‘a zealot’ in his persecution of them.

But his project of persecution is spectacularly interrupted on the road to Damascus when he meets the risen Christ.

God broke in, and we know where the story goes from there.

Paul chooses to follow Jesus at great personal cost.

He is willing to give up all his important status in the community, his personal career plans, his religious traditions, and most certainly his friends too.

In his letter to the Philippians, he writes:

 *I have lost everything for him, but what I lost I think of as sewer trash, so that I might gain Christ and be found in him.* (Philippians 3:8-9)

The things that Paul previously valued, are now of no importance to him by comparison to what he has found in Christ.

We see the same commitment in our scripture from John’s gospel today.

Mary enters the room and pours ‘an extraordinary amount’ of pure nard onto Jesus’ feet.

Now just to explain – Nard is a fragrant made from a very rare plant. A small amount of it is often used when bathing bodies for burial. But it is so rare and costly, that it is often mixed with other inferior oils – yet here John describes that Mary uses “pure Nard”. And she uses “almost three quarters of a pound” of it. (John 12:3)

It is seen to be such an extravagant and costly act, that Judas complains:

*“This perfume was worth a year’s wages!*” (John 12:5)

This would have been a great cost for Mary – who was not a wealthy woman.

But Mary is willing to sacrifice this costly ointment because she places her value on Jesus, rather than on the expensive perfume with which she showers his feet.

Her love for Jesus is so great – not only does she use this expensive perfume, but also wipes Jesus’ feet with her hair – a humble act that would have been performed by the lowliest of servants.

Jesus recognizes that Mary is willing to choose him at what ever cost, and reprimands Judas, saying: “*Leave her alone.”* (John 12:7)

In both these scriptures we see that what is most valuable is following Jesus.

And we see examples of how listening to God’s call to discipleship - can sometimes be at great cost.

As the church moves forward in discipleship, it can involve costly choices.

The Catholic Church this week has had to make a decision about recognizing their involvement in the trauma caused by residential schools. At the Vatican, Pope Francis has listened to the stories of survivors, and the pleas of our indigenous people, and following a week of talks with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis delegations, it is so healing to hear Pope Francis apologize, and to speak of feeling "sorrow and shame" for the conduct of those who ran the schools.

It is a step towards healing.

It is a step of discipleship.

But it is also a costly step – one that will have not only financial repercussions for the Catholic Church, but also costly in terms of confessing and owning the truth of what happened.

The United Church, as well as other denominations, are also making costly choices as they move forward in discipleship and respond to an ever-changing church. While we recognize the importance of the past, we are learning that it is fertilizer for new growth. And, we are realizing that the new that emerges, may not look anything like what we knew previously. Some of the traditions and rituals on which we had placed so much value, are slowly making way for something new.

And the price of moving into a new way to ‘be church’ can be hard and costly.

Paul reminds the Philippians that sometimes we have to:

 *forget about the things behind … and reach out for the things**ahead. …* (and that ) *… the goal to pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 3:13-14)

Here at Grace United we should give ourselves a pat on the back for being willing to take the costly risk of change:

* For letting go of the bulletins that we like to hold in our hands,
* for embracing our digital ministry even if it means having microphones in the sanctuary,
* for using our welcome and accessible doors to enter and exit, even if it means changing our routine.

These changes are not easy – and for some, these ways of letting go of traditions and moving forward as a church are very costly.

There is also cost for us personally as we move forward in our personal discipleship with Christ. Today in church we are welcoming two new members – Bev and Laverne McBurney. They are willing to standup in front of us all and make a personal commitment to celebrating God’s presence, to live with respect in creation, to love and serve others, and to seek justice and resist evil.

These promises require a costly commitment.

And as a community of faith, we will be renewing our commitment to live out the mission and ministry of Christ’s church. When we truly put these words into action, it will require a costly choice. It will require us to collectively act in ways that are welcoming, inspiring and supportive of all.

To truly live out the mission and ministry of Christ’s church does come at a cost!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a well known and much respected theologian, coined the term ‘Cheap Grace’. He said that Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. It is accepting God’s never-ending love, without doing anything to change the way we live our lives in the world, and without changing anything about our relationship with God.

Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without recognizing that Jesus Christ is living and incarnate in everything we do!

Perhaps one way to explain cheap grace is the example of people who only go to church, and do little else in their lives as Christians.

People who believe that going to church is all that they need to do to be Christians. They keep God and their Christian lives in church on Sunday mornings. This is cheap grace.

But the opposite of this is Costly grace.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again, and again, and again; in everything we say and in everything we do.

It is costly because it calls us to follow at whatever the cost:

* a change in lifestyle,
* a willingness to give up on those things that we had valued as important,
* a willingness to stand up, admit our faith, and be counted as a Christian.
* a willingness to admit that we are wrong and we need forgiveness.
* a willingness to be Christ’s hands and feet in the world …. The list goes on and on …

And it is costly, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ, who paid the ultimate cost with his life on the cross.

Moving forward with Christ is a costly choice.

Paul knew this. Mary demonstrates this. We as a community of faith are trying to live by this.

As we journey to the cross together, I invite us to reflect if there are still times when we get caught up in the values that have been designated valuable by society? And I encourage you, to take the time to let those things go, and to make the costly choice to live by Divine Spirit?

I can honestly say that there is not a day that goes by when I am not grateful to God for helping me to make the costly choice of going into ministry.

And I can promise you, that when you make the costly choice to move forward and live by Divine Spirit, then with costly Grace, comes ultimate love!

Amen.