

Sermon for Sunday, April 23, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"CHRISTIAN FELLOW TRAVELERS"

St. Luke 14:25-33

Text: "For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it?" St. Luke 14:28

In these days the term "fellow traveler" has become a sort of dirty word. We have associated it almost exclusively with communism. And yet the term is not so much a designation of political party as it is an invitation of commitment. Let me say that again. The term "fellow traveler" is an invitation of the level of commitment. You see the fact of the matter is the "fellow traveler" is one who is not fully and completely committed. It means that he believes in the particular ideology or philosophy of life but he is not personally committed to its accomplishment. It means he believes in the particular doctrine but he feels no personal responsibility for it. A communist fellow traveler is one who believes in the doctrines and ideas of communism but he himself is not a member of the party. He accepts the belief but he does not accept the hard and demanding discipline and devotion and efforts required of a full fledged member.

Now, if one looks at the world in which we live---a world filled with tension and fear, with anxiety and frustration--we look at a world torn and divided--a world that has seen desolating destruction from two major wars, a world that even this morning is dangerously close to involvement in a third world war. As we look at this kind of world in which we find ourselves, it is no wonder that anxiety grips the hearts of men with icy fingers. I don't know if you read the funny papers, but I do. I can't stand the paper if I don't finish up with the comics. Yesterday in the one of the strips, the little boy was watching television. He was moaning and groaning, he was terrified, he would hide his eyes, he would say "I can't dare to look". His brother comes in and says, "I told you not to watch those horror movies if it upsets you so." He says, "I'm not, I'm watching the news." As one listens to the news casts, he feels his heart sometimes pound and his blood surge and his breathing heavy. For so many, desolation and despair have become the watch words of a gloomy future.

Now, how does one respond to the kind of a world we live in? How does one react to life in these days with their gloomy possibilities and at the same time their thrilling challenges? On what and on whom does man place his faith? On what and on whom do men bet their very existence? Now it would seem to me there are basically two alternatives. One alternative is to place our confidence in man and in what we can do. This is the alternative, for example, that communism is offering the world today, the alternative that man is on his own. God is ruled out. The future lies in the hands of men and the communist philosophy becomes the messiah of the world. Whitaker Chambers, the former communist, in his book Witness writes this, "Sooner or later" he says, "one of my good friends is sure to ask me how did it happen that a man like you became a communist. Every time I wince, not at the personal question, but at the failure to grasp the fact that a man does not as a rule become a communist because he is attracted to communism but because he is driven to despair by the crisis of history through which the world is passing and it seems to be the only viable alternative." I might add that if any of you are depending on the systems of men to bring about peace and salvation in the world today, whether it be capitalism, democracy or any other human device, you will be ultimately disillusioned and disappointed.

Now the alternative to placing one's confidence in man is to place one's confidence in the power and the integrity of a loving God. Now, it is about this last alternative that I wish to speak this morning. Contrary to what you may think, the

struggle of our day, the struggle that works men today, is a far more profound struggle than the fight among man devised forms of government. To think that the struggle of our time is among governmental ideologies is to be naive. No, the struggle that is griping the world today is a struggle for the souls of men. It is not a struggle as to what kind of governments men will have but it is a struggle for the souls of men. As Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, put it in his book, The World and The West, "The present encounter", he says, "is now moving off the technological plane on to the spiritual plane." In this struggle that grips today, there is no middle ground." You will remember in the Old Testament when Joshua stood before the children of Israel and he said to them, "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." Choose. As the writer of the book of Revelations put it, "There is no middle ground," he said "because you are neither hot nor cold. Because you are neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth, said the Lord." No, there is no place for fellow travelers in the sort of struggle going on in the world today. There is no place for the luke warm. There is no demilitarised zone, no neutralization zone, no neutrality zone. Now, most of us have the basic misconception about Christianity. We think it is all about the glories of some future golden city, all about goodness and peace and free life and all about Christmas and Easter bunnies and lovely organ music. But in our scripture this morning, Jesus throws cold water on that concept. Instead, he says, "If any man comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, and everything dear to him, that man cannot be my disciple. Whoever puts his trust in me must declare his distrust of all else." Instead of saying something helpful and promising about the life to come, he says "Look, count what it will cost you in this life and consider whether you are equal to being my disciple."

So in this world in which we find ourselves, on whom and on what shall a man pledge his faith? Now, if you decide on God, the first point I want to make this morning is this--most of us are just fellow travelers. A German writer of our day has said, "Even people who pay little attention, either in their speech or their life, to the fact that there is a god, have a serious propensity for keeping some connection with the Holy, even if only a very thin thread." Now, as a minister, I want to assure you that that's exactly right. People go to church on occasion to hear the choir sing or observe the Easter season, they go there to have their babies baptized, their children married and they certainly want a preacher when there is a death in the family. They would not see the church abolished, they would even give occasional nominal sum to its support. You see the fact is there is few of us willing to be totally submerged in a godless world. We want to keep open a view to one very, very tiny star. Most of us are Christian Fellow travelers wanting just a little bit of God. But the truth is, back at the office, or at the machine, or in the kitchen, others become merely competitors instead of neighbors in whom Christ meets us. We strive for success, never stopping to ask ourselves if God is blessing our work. We never stop to face up to the question, "Am I in the will of God?" We never ask ourselves, "Who am I and where is all that I'm doing taking me?"

Yes, on what shall a man bet his existence? If you place your bet on God, the second thing I want to say to you is this: We spiritual fellow travelers, we half-hearted Christians, we who are sitting back on our big fat orthodox, we have just enough of God to bother our conscience and deprive us of our unconcern. It is a sort of spiritual ambivalence. You know what ambivalence is. Suppose there is a child with an older brother and a baby sister is born into the home. On the one hand he wants to be like his big brother--to do the things he does and act the way he does. On the other hand, he wants the particular love and attention that

the baby gets. He is ambivalent. One moment he is acting big like his brother and the next he is on his hands and knees crawling and baby-talking trying to get attention. To be a fellow traveler of Christ is to become spiritually ambivalent. But because we are people who have a little bit of God, we can no longer be tough, virile, red-blooded sinners like the godless pagans. But on the other hand, we do not have the necessary commitment that belongs to the purged and purified saint who is utterly and totally devoted to his God. Our spiritual ambivalence pulls us first one way and pulls us then in the other way and we lose perspective and face spiritual off balance like a confused child who has been blindfolded and turned round and round, we don't quite know where to pin the spiritual donkey's tail.

In our day it is those of us who are Christian fellow travelers who are anxious and concerned and uneasy. It is the fellow traveler who is always running at half-steam. He always has a dirty conscience and a wounded heart. He wants a bit of eternity and some assurance, but he is not willing to pay the price of a totally changed life. If you place your faith in God the first thing I want you to say this morning is this: Only the singlehearted man has an unfogged and unobscured vision of God. Jesus knew this. That is why he insisted that to follow him was an unequivocal decision--"no man," he said, "having put his hand to the plow and looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." He said, "no man can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or else he will cling to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon," he said. Or as our Scripture this morning records it, "Would any of you think of building a tower without sitting down first and calculating the cost, to see whether he could afford to finish it?" And then Jesus concluded, "So also none of you can be a disciple of mine without taking leave, cutting the strings to everything you find precious in life.

If you are struggling with doubt and uncertainty this morning--if your faith seems weak and inadequate--if your life is filled with moral failures and you are wrestling with the dark shadows of sadness, depression and disappointment--the reason may be that ungodly division in your own heart. For the Christian fellow traveler wants only a little piece of God, God is just life with a brake on, a pain in the conscience, an ache in the heart. The half-hearted are tempted and tormented and tugged and tossed to and fro. The radical demands of Christ were made in order to free us from the confounding troubles of a divided heart. For if you have a divided heart that causes you torment and pain and tears, only radical decision can save you. Jesus says, "If you want to follow me, you had better count the cost in this life of what you will have to pay. It will do you no good to lay the foundations and discover that you are not willing to finish the job. You must say goodbye to many of the things you cling to. If you want God you must let go of things and the devil." Are you willing to do that this morning? If you think you are willing, you had better sit down and count the cost. If the price is more than you had thought to pay, you will have only a little piece of God that disturbs you and causes you fear and terror and anxiety out of a dirty conscience and a wounded heart.

So, in this world of ours, a man must believe in something or someone. If you decide for God, the fourth and final point I want to make is this: Your enemy is more dangerous than you suspect. You may think that all that stands between you and Jesus are a few small sins, some minor immoralities, and touch of unkindness. But I want to tell you, that the truth is the devil is attacking your flank in a clever maneuver where you least expect it. Would you suspect that the devil would

take your love for your parents or your love for your children to separate you from God? See how it works. Suppose I love my child and I feed him, clothe him and I see to his education--I smother him with love and affection. But have I prepared him for the powers of sin and suffering and death? Have I brought him into contact with the Lord? And suppose a traffic accident takes my child from me. Do I not cry out in protest, "How can this so-called God of love permit such a thing happen to me?" My love for my child has led me to condemn God. Now suppose I love my wife, which I do. And something happens that my wife is taken from me and I cry out in protest against God and say, "Why did you let this happen to me? How could you do this to me?" My love for my wife has led me to condemn God. That's why Jesus said we have to love him above father or mother or wife or children.

But look what happens when I love God first. Each new day I accept my child as a fresh gift from God and each day I commit that child to God's keeping. The really important question to me is whether my child will one day do the right thing and live in the peace of God. Then, though my child be taken from me, even when I loved him most deep, snatched from my hands, even in the moment of deepest loss God is very near to me. I have loved my child not merely with foolish fondness, but I have loved him under the very hand of God.

A writer tells us of a letter he received from a young man about to take his life. He wrote, "You can tell my parents. They will be thunderstruck. They never knew me, despite all their care for me. They think they have fed me, but I am starved. They made a home for me, but I was cold and homeless."

You can be certain of this: When God's gifts to you--whomever they are, whatever they are--become more important to you than God--when your life, your success, your children or any precious thing is more dear and important to you than God, the foundation of the heavenly temple you set out to build lies unfinished, the foundation weed-grown.

Yes, your enemy is more difficult, more dangerous than you suspect, for he can take our very best--even our love for our parents, our wives or our children, and use that love in our lives as a denial of God.

Most of us this morning really are Christian fellow travelers who want only a little piece of God. But such a little piece only makes us ambivalent. Jesus Christ calls us in a radical demand to a full and utter and complete allegiance. But he warns us to count the cost for even our best--even our love--is used against us by our enemy.

Jesus is calling you to discipleship this morning. He calls you to complete dedication and commitment for fellow travelers won't do. He warns you that none of you can be a disciple of his without taking leave of everything else. Count the cost. Are you willing to pay the price of that kind of discipleship. Only you can make that decision.