

GUIDING LIGHTS: RECLAIMING EVERYDAY VIRTUES

Take a Deep Breath - Prudence

Luke 14:25-33

September 21, 2025

Mrs. Gardner called it a *cool-down* period.

Fifth grade. 1992. Our class held a debate on the presidential race. I had barely slept the night before from excitement. That morning when I saw classmates divided evenly between tables clearly marked George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, I made my choice. I marched to Ross Perot's table with all the confidence of a ten-year-old political junkie. I looked around. I was all by myself.

To be honest, what happened next is a blur, but apparently, I argued too passionately, too loudly, for Ross Perot's agenda. Perhaps I interrupted my classmates a few too many times as well. My behavior earned me a place in the hallway, where Mrs. Gardner patiently asked me to take a deep breath. *Cool down*. In my defense, I offer one minor point. By the time of my unfortunate exit, three other students had joined Perot's table. Of course, despite my spirited support, Ross Perot lost the election. It was my first of many political defeats. Still, my interest in public discourse has persisted even as my vocational path took a different turn. I do hope my temper has cooled a bit.

Today, I find myself wishing Mrs. Gardner were in charge, that someone would require a cool-down period. Measured dialogue has all but disappeared from the political landscape. Disembodied online pronouncements—fed to us by algorithms carefully calibrated to fuel our fury—leave no room for response, relationship, or responsibility. This drives us to extremes. We set up our camps. We draw our lines. We prepare for battle.

You know this script. Strike first. When hit, hit back harder. Feed the fire. Pull no punches. Cover your ears and shout your truth. Breathe shallow; move fast.

It is a costly mistake. In the moments that matter most, we do not need speed or self-certainty. What we need is prudence.

This temptation to tribal allegiance—to choose your place at the table—is not unique to the modern political landscape. Which brings us to this morning's uncomfortable gospel passage. I want you to picture the scene: the movement that Jesus began in the backcountry of Galilee is gaining momentum quickly. The crowds that follow him are swelling in size. The people in those crowds are excited. They're swept up in the moment, in the movement. They're ready to commit, and breathless energy is creating a buzz that even local leaders are starting to notice with skepticism, perhaps bordering on fear.

And Jesus stops. He turns around. *Take a breath. This is important*. Then he does the one thing no church growth consultant would ever recommend: he raises the bar on belonging.

Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother... even life itself... cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross... will not be my disciple.

Strong words to say the least. This is not a verse for coffee mugs. Let's explore them. It's important to say that Jesus is not calling for literal hostility against one's family. In Greek, the word *miseō* (hate) echoes an ancient Semitic idiom about comparative allegiance. Setting priorities. And here, Jesus sets a high bar. To be his follower, we must order our loyalties so that he comes first—over people, over possessions, even over life itself. The point is not contempt for family or for things. The point is allegiance. Jesus is naming the cost of following him over every other claim.

We know this because Jesus tells two sobering parables. A builder who lays a foundation without counting the cost—the unfinished shell will become a public eyesore, a daily reminder of failed foresight. A king who rushes to war without considering the long odds—soldiers die, families grieve, a nation falters. Imprudence is never private; communities bear its weight.

Jesus is not discouraging discipleship. He's defining it. *Carry the cross* is not a slogan—it's a path, the path of sacrificial faith, the ordinary, ongoing, self-giving, daily living, cross bearing. Joining Jesus will cost everything.

The builder and the king act with reckless haste. Discipleship means discovering we're joining a construction project, a campaign, that is already underway. Our choices will either strengthen or weaken the whole effort.

So we should consider the choice with clear-eyed wisdom, with prudence. Jesus insists: *Count the cost, don't calculate the benefits. Join my mission, don't enlist me for yours. Seek God's kingdom, don't secure support for our own.*

In a polarized world, it is tempting to treat Jesus like a spiritual mascot for your cause, the patron saint of our personal preference. But Jesus did not come to endorse our agendas. He came to upend them. His mission is not to comfort or to protect our comfort, to justify our tribe, or co-sign our cause. His mission is to redeem. His mission is to restore. His mission is to reorder the broken world. And he means to begin with you. If following Jesus never disrupts your priorities, or disturbs your comfort, you have only baptized your bias. Ask yourself: When was the last time following him made you uncomfortable? When was the last time it cost you something or changed your mind? This shift from recruiting Jesus to following Jesus is the essence of prudence.

Christian prudence is not fearful hesitation. It's thoughtful discernment for faithful action. Jesus is not scaring us; he's preparing us.

Prudence means making decisions with an eye on the future and a heart for the community. It's the virtue

that asks: How does this choice align with Christ's mission? Who will be affected? How can my faith serve a greater purpose? Those questions should shape every significant decision we make.

I don't want to misrepresent. The cost of discipleship is real. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood this when he wrote that Christ's call is ultimately a call to come and die, to die to our own agendas, our own kingdoms, our own control. Bonhoeffer wrote, "The cross is laid on every Christian." Following Jesus means the death of the selfish life. Later in Luke, Jesus puts it plainly: you cannot serve two masters. When many twist the words of Jesus to their purpose, letting our lives reflect *his* purpose is a powerful act of faith.

This is exactly what Jesus asks of the crowds. Don't just follow the frenzy of the moment. Count the cost. Make this choice with prudence, not just passion.

Karl Barth wrote that we must regard "every human being, even the oddest, most villainous or miserable, as one to whom Jesus is Brother and God is Father; and we [must] deal with them on this assumption." When we choose prudence, we create the conditions for soul encounters instead of vicious battles.

In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where both of my parents were raised, there is a story about an Amish man who is at the store one day when an out-of-towner, a nosey tourist, begins to quiz him about his lifestyle and faith. Finally, the man from out of town asks, "Are you a Christian?" The Amish man calmly answers, "You'll have to ask my neighbor."

Gospel witness happens in grocery stores and on soccer sidelines. It is possible that you have been in a heated exchange recently. To practice prudence, you must pause. If even for just a fleeting moment, picture the other person as a bearer of God's image, not an enemy to defeat. Then proceed with reverence.

Yes, this discipleship comes with a price. Following Jesus will reorder your priorities. It will challenge your assumptions. It will ask you to love people you would rather avoid altogether. It may cost your comfort, your

security, even your certainty. But not following costs far more—purpose, hope, the joy only found in joining God's work in the world.

This is why Jesus raises the bar so high. He is not trying to thin the crowd. He's inviting them into deep, durable faith that can go the distance. You see, Jesus wants followers, not fans. He knew passion alone would not sustain his disciples when following would demand everything they had. And it did.

In days of dangerous division, routine violence, and carved-up tribes, we need more than religious zeal. This moment demands disciples who count the cost and choose Christ above party, above faction, above self.

This week, when those decisive moments come—and they will come—practice prudence. Before you react, before you choose sides, before you speak or post—pause. Pray. Ask: Am I serving Christ's mission or my own agenda? How will my choice shape the community that I'm called to build? How you respond may be the gospel message someone else needs.

A confession. Thirty-three years removed from that fifth-grade classroom, I'm still at it. I still feel the same tension, the temptation to win the argument by force of volume. For those of us who are human, prudence is practice. It's a discipline. We choose it each day.

Still, I think Mrs. Gardner was right. Sometimes our wisest move is to pause, not because we lack conviction, but because we choose love over victory.

Jesus isn't content with a crowd worked into a frenzy. He's looking for disciples who have counted the cost and decided he's worth it. He's worth it. He's worth everything. Worth our lives.

There is a cross for each of us willing to bear it. Take a deep breath. Consider the cost. Choose Christ above all else. I promise you this: it's a life worth living.

Pray with me:

Holy One, give us prudence to pause, courage to follow, and grace to trust you. Amen.