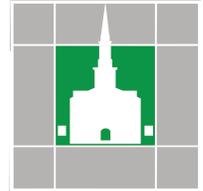


# Cost of Discipleship

Scripture text: Acts 15:1-18  
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey  
Center Church on the Green, May 2, 2021

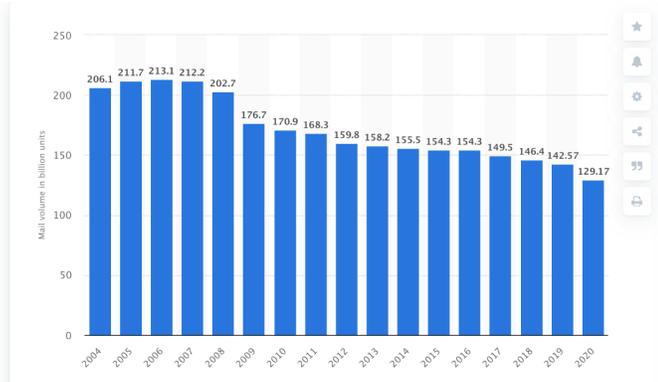


So today I'm going to share a story that any of you over the age of 50 may recognize. If you haven't yet attained that milestone, don't worry. Your time is coming.



All of you know that one thing we've been able to count on, even during a pandemic, is postal delivery. It was so important to many of us that any hint of our mail being curtailed stirred up great anxiety and emotions.

This is true even though the amount of actual mail in our post boxes has declined. In 2004 the U.S. Postal



Service moved over 206 billion pieces of mail. Last year it was just about 129 billion pieces.<sup>1</sup> They did see huge growth in packages, which shouldn't be a shock to any of us.

No matter how big the overall stream, there's been one fat envelope showing up periodically for at least the past 10 years. It comes in different shapes, sizes, and colors, and there's a variety of slogans and invitations printed on the outside. We can identify it because of the four capital letters printed somewhere on it:

A A R P

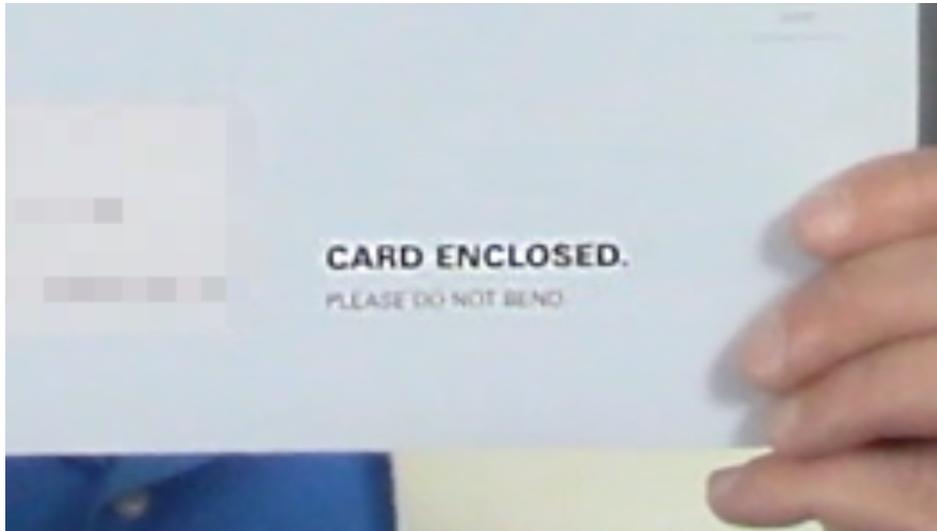
And there's something else that's always printed on that



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<sup>1</sup> "United States Postal Service's total mail volume from 2004 to 2020" (chart), published by E. Mazareanu, 17 March 2021; via Statista Web site, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/320234/mail-volume-of-the-usps/>, retrieved from the Internet 5/1/2021.

envelope. I guess it's there in the hope that people will open it.  
"Membership card enclosed."



Oh, boy! It's like that scene in the holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life" where the young George Bailey archly informs Mary Hatch that the intriguing magazine in his back pocket is the National Geographic Society's journal, and that it's for members only, and that he, George Bailey, has been nominated to become a member of the National Geographic Society, so Mary can't read it.



The A.A.R.P. has sent me a membership card! Think of all the wonderful things to follow, now that I am a member.

I have nothing against the AARP. But the thing is, I'm not a member of the AARP, and have never been a member of the AARP. If I had kept all the cards they have sent over the past decade, they would make a tidy stack, and I would be AARP-rich, I guess.

But unless I decide to respond, and send them some money, all those membership cards are meaningless.

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Affiliations and identities are all around us. We can belong to clubs, corporations, shopper affinity programs, and so much more.

Some of those affiliations are trivial. I haven't seen many people in my daily life pull out their Stop & Shop card and testify to the amazing transformation belonging to Stop & Shop has wrought in their lives. For those of us who drive and own a vehicle, in this day and age there are few of us who would proclaim "I'm a Pontiac person." We might still identify by our hobbies and pastimes, such as painting or running. I know that sports teams sell a lot of jerseys and caps, but it doesn't make any of us a Yankee or a Red Sox or a Patriot.

There are naturally much deeper identities we carry with us, and some of them are so fundamental that we don't often see them or think about them. For those of you who are natural-born

citizens of your country, the status of citizen is something with which you grew up, like you grew up with breathing and eating and sleeping. You don't have to hang a certificate on your wall, or think about it much as you travel, because it's a natural part of your identity.

We also know what a high emotional price people pay to change their citizenship. For people who want to become a United States citizen, that price starts with how selective the process is in this era. With a demand numbering in the millions, only about 850 thousand persons were “naturalized” in 2019, and that's a number that's been going up since 1990.<sup>2</sup> It takes years of screening and working and more screening and a test to become a U.S. citizen, and many persons do not ever get past the first stages.

But they try, because the affiliations and identities that matter have a cost that they—that we—are willing to pay.

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Speaking of costs, if you are an adult male and you were listening to today's scripture, I imagine it's crossed your mind that

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<sup>2</sup> “Naturalizations granted,” Department of Homeland Security, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (updated 2019); on USAFacts, <https://usafacts.org/data/topics/people-society/immigration/immigration-and-immigration-enforcement/naturalizations-granted/>; retrieved from the Internet 5/1/2021

there's a little something extra riding on the outcome of this conference at Jerusalem.

It also has some baggage that comes with it, so let's get one thing straight: this is not a debate between earnest Christians and stubborn Jews. We are in on one of the earliest debates about doctrine in the history of our Christian movement. The question that has arisen is the legitimate concern:

Jesus who brought us this Good News was as Jewish as we are, and even he was circumcised. We believe he was the Messiah of our people, the one promised to all the Jewish people. All our male members are circumcised.

On the other hand, the Spirit of Jesus sent us out into places where no one is circumcised, and in fact they believe the practice is simple mutilation of the body. They believe the Good News as we do, and we believe that God's Spirit has called them to be included in what God is doing.

So, what does it cost? How will we know they are truly part of us if they don't carry the mark we carry?

What's important here is that everyone agrees that following Jesus carries a cost. It's not a trivial choice to start following the teachings of Jesus, because they lead us to treat ourselves and our neighbor differently than the society around us would have us do.

The argument simmers down, and there's silence. And in that silence a truth of the Holy Spirit emerges.

Believing and committing to live out the Good News of salvation carries a cost all in itself. God does not distinguish between the natural-born and the naturalized. God opens citizenship in the realm of salvation to anyone who responds to the Spirit's call, and no extra marks are needed.

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There is a cost and a reward associated with our faith. Our own statement of faith names it “The Cost and Joy of Discipleship.”<sup>3</sup>

The cost is found in commitment. When we truly and consciously commit to the faith and the teachings that are part of this community, we are choosing to love who God loves, to embrace who Jesus embraces, to be enlightened and informed by those who the Spirit touches. That means choosing against the tribalism and the culture of death and revenge and avarice that has bubbled just under the surface of our everyday dealings for the past 40 years. That means saying “yes” when others say “no,” and “no”

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<sup>3</sup> “United Church of Christ Statement of Faith—original version”, 1959. Cleveland, Ohio: The United Church of Christ; on <https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith/> ; retrieved from the Web 5/1/2021.

when others says “yes.” That means giving up privilege and status that come through shadowed transaction deep in our history.

The reward is found in community. When we choose to love who God loves, to embrace who Jesus embraces, to be enlightened and informed by those who the Spirit touches, we become vessels of the salvation that Jesus brought to us in his life, his death, and his resurrection. Choosing against the culture of death also means choosing for the culture of life and community, choosing for structural change. Allowing our “yes” and our “no” to be informed by the Spirit gives us a new status and authority, a new affiliation and identity, as people of life, people of God.

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I’m hoping that some of us are relieved today to hear that our bodies are just fine as they are, and that we don’t need anything extra or, particularly, something less to be acceptable in God’s sight.

That being said, all of us have ahead of us the lifelong work of committing more deeply, hour by hour and day by day, to the life-changing faith we share.

May the choices we make lead to a fuller life in Christ, our Source and our Strength. Alleluia! Amen.