

1. I preached recently about St. Thomas as a stable institution where members can seek constant conversion to Christ, against a backdrop of a Dubois economy that is very harsh. Today's lessons address the cost of conversion to Christ. I highlight that the process of constant conversion to Christ is a community effort, a parish wide undertaking, as well as an individual effort.
2. The lessons present sharp apparent contradictions. Moses in Deuteronomy urges the Israelite people to choose life and prosperity by walking in the ways of God.
3. Jesus in the passage from Luke's Gospel teaches that anyone who wants to become his disciple must hate life itself, and hate all family members. The Bible seems to be telling the reader to choose life in one passage, and to hate life in another. How can these passages be reconciled?
4. The same Gospel passage in Luke to me fails to make sense as well, at first reading, because it says on the one hand, count the risk before making a big undertaking, and on the other hand, it says a person has to give up everything to be a disciple of Jesus.
5. First, the passage stresses the need to plan and count the cost before making any major undertaking. If you are going to build a tower, first figure out the cost to see if you have enough resources to complete the building. Or suppose you are a king heading into battle with an opposing army. Jesus says, the king should count the size of his own army, compare his army with that of his opponent, and if the opponent has the larger army, then the wise course is to sue for peace to avoid a disastrous defeat in battle.
6. So what I find confusing is, what does sitting down and calculating the chances of success in a project have to do with the costs of discipleship, where, Jesus says up front, the disciple is going to have to give up everything, anyway?
7. If I am going to lose everything by becoming Jesus' disciple, why bother to count the cost?
8. In fact the instructions to calculate the chances of succeeding on a project, directly contradict what Jesus says in chapter 9 of Luke's Gospel. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and turns back is fit to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus says this about putting hand to the plow in response to a series of people who say they want to follow him, but they want first to delay the start of being disciples until after they finish other important tasks, such as one person saying he wants stop to bury their father who has just died.
9. Why does Jesus, then, here in chapter 14 insert these two examples about the importance of counting the cost before commencing on a new and risky venture? If the cost of following Jesus is everything, why bother to count the cost?
10. Perhaps the answer to this conundrum, is, even though the outcome of

conversion to being a disciple is to lose life itself in the sense of letting go of one's own desire in favor of what God wants, human nature is to want first to count the cost in practical terms.

11. All the ministries of St. Thomas have this quality. We can plan. We can calculate the risks of succeeding or failing in one of our ministries. We try to think things through.
12. We can think we are making the effort to choose life over death, as Moses invites us to do. But, in the end, the outcomes are up to God. In the end, we have to be ready to let everything go and trust in the Lord. And the Lord will continually change our understanding of what the Lord is up to as the ministry goes forward in time, or in other words constantly convert us.
13. St Thomas as a church organization, and Dubois as a rural town are like that: only by risking wisely everything for Christ can this community succeed, and in the process be transformed, converted to something new.
14. Continual conversion here does not mean going on a new weight loss diet, or personal life style change program. Conversion is not just some plan to carry out organizational reform. The meaning of daily conversion can be seen clearly in this prayer from Isaiah the prophet, "God you will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are fixed on you. For in returning and rest we shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be our strength." "In returning and rest we shall be saved". In daily returning one's mind to being fixed on Jesus is a person converted daily.
15. Towns, rural towns, really do fail sometimes. I stayed overnight in Thermopolis last week on my way back from my travels to Cody for a clergy retreat, and then to Sheridan to get one of our cars repaired. Thermopolis presented a very emptied out downtown, with lots of vacant store fronts in the middle of town, lots of places for rent. And I wondered, what are the people of Dubois going to have to do to avoid the fate of Thermopolis? Especially with the national economy at serious risk of a recession.
16. I got another jolt when I returned to Dubois, and learned that one of our local restaurant owners is considering shutting her business, Connie's Cooking and Catering.
17. Of course, a St. Thomas is not primarily a vehicle for economic development, but the encouragement and support the church offers help swing the direction of the Dubois community towards choosing life and finding the prosperity, which Moses mentions explicitly.
18. The Opportunity Shop has been one of our main ministries for helping the whole community succeed. When the parish set out to create the Opportunity Shop, no one sat down as if they were going to build the tower in the passage. No one figured out all the risks involved, although some financial projections were done. Everyone pitched in and we simply plunged ahead.

19. Now eighteen months later, this past month has been a challenging time for many in the parish, with dramatic changes in the management of the Opp Shop and the announcement of the planned closing of the furniture store branch in the Ramshorn Inn. What is going to happen?, many are asking. Let me again remind the congregation here what conversion means: “In returning and rest we shall be saved”. In daily returning one’s mind to being fixed on Jesus is a person converted daily.
20. The parish has in its past one hundred years had to change and grow, and be converted many times during challenging and sometimes upsetting times. Sometimes St. Thomas has had a big church school and sometimes not. When the ministry of Adeline Ross came to an end after many years, the parish must have had to rediscover itself, and be converted again. The change of the parish from a mission congregation to a full parish some ten years ago required growth in understanding. The purchase of the Stewart House must have let some in the parish to come to a new understanding of what ministry in Dubois meant.
21. The challenge to constant conversion to Christ has never been an easy one for this community or anywhere else. And Jesus does not invite his followers to consider just investing their efforts in one single project. Jesus asks his followers to give up everything to come and follow him, over and over again. This current time provides an invitation to the parish community to look carefully at itself and ask what the Lord requires of us. Some of the former habitual ways of St. Thomas for doing business could stand some improvement.
22. For example, some vestry members were asking as how many people are supposed to serve on the vestry and who decides that? What are the terms of office for vestry members? How should the agenda for vestry meetings be set, and by whom? What are the various ministries of this parish, and how should they be supported? With the twelve ministries active at St. Thomas, as I mentioned in my sermon two weeks ago, what are the fairest and most open methods for deciding how to make these ministries work and work well.
23. Alyse and other church leaders remembered some answers for these questions, but few were clear on what the accepted guidelines were.
24. In our recent struggles over the opp shop management, several people became angry and upset, as did I. But no one seemed entirely clear about what the proper procedures were for making major decisions about this or any other particular ministry. As a result, we got ourselves a bit tangled up.
25. Today’s gospel passage, suggesting that before undertaking to build a great big tower, one should sit down and think through how to do it, seems particularly apt. The passage invites St. Thomas to create clearer guidelines

and procedures for our community for making ministry decisions at this time, so everyone can contribute their best thinking. The vestry will be considering in the coming weeks different ways to go about its work in overseeing the ministries of this parish, hopefully to allow for more reasoned decision making.

26. There is no way around the challenges set before a person or a community at each stage of life. God challenges the community at each step of the Way by constantly converting a person and communities to his loving will. One simply has to use one's brains, think carefully, pray deeply, and plunge ahead. Continually ask what would the Lord have me do in this next step in my life? Lord, am I really going to have be converted again? Let me again remind the congregation what conversion means: "In returning and rest we shall be saved". In daily returning one's mind to being fixed on Jesus is a person converted daily.
27. The Deuteronomy passage shows the Lord setting before the people of Israel, life and prosperity, death and adversity. Therefore, choose life, eternal life, by following the Lord's ways, Moses teaches. The disciple of Jesus really has no choice, but to follow him, since no other path leads to true life, to eternal life.
28. St. Thomas is and always has been a wonderful community church. Let us learn to think together better, to calculate together our risks, as the Lord invites us to do, but knowing full well that the cost is letting go of our old selves in the process of continually converting to the peace of Christ. St. Thomas has been about re-creating itself like this for over 100 years.
29. In Jesus name, Amen.