

“ALWAYS LOOKING FORWARD!”

Luke 9:51-62

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When you have several jobs to accomplish, do you do the easy ones first, or do you try to tackle the hard ones and get them out of the way while you have maximum energy? I have seen demonstrations, and probably you have, too, involving big rocks, small stones and sand that need to fit into a jar. If you put the sand in first, there isn't room for the big rocks and the pebbles. But, if you start with the rocks, then put in the pebbles, then the sand, it all fits. Moral of the object lesson: start with the major issues facing you. If you don't tackle the big problems first, you may never get on top of them.

As a person who would rather avoid conflict than face it head on, I have a much easier time doing the things I enjoy first, and hoping (usually erroneously), that by the time I get to them, the bigger problems will go away, or at least not loom so large. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and hoping you'll get different results! But how many of us keep doing what we've always done, and hope against hope that it will turn out differently this time!

Jesus has been preaching and teaching in the Galilean countryside where he is much sought-after and well loved. He is a popular preacher, an engaging teacher, and an effective healer. Folks flock to hear him everywhere he goes. But Jesus knows that he has been called to a more difficult task. God intends that he go to Jerusalem, to the capital city, and there witness to the love of God. Jerusalem is the power center of the country. Jesus feels he is being called to speak the truth to power: to expose the pretense and corruption of the government officials, to challenge those in authority and remind them that God is ultimately in control of their country and their individual lives, to remind them that beyond the laws of the land are the moral laws of the universe that were established by God. Rather than stay in the relative comfort of the countryside, Luke tells us that Jesus “*sets his face*” to go to Jerusalem. There he will face the strongest challenges to his way of life head on. Jesus is dealing with the big rocks first.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus encounters rejection. That Jesus encounters opposition is no big surprise at this point in Luke's Gospel. While I have indicated that he is a popular preacher, Jesus' sermons appear to have preached away more people than he has won. His sermons make them uncomfortable. In Nazareth, after just one sermon, they wanted to take him out and kill him! People are offended by his teaching.

So when these Samaritans oppose him, it's no surprise. It's also no surprise that some of his disciples step up and ask Jesus to bring down fire and punish these people. It is not surprising because the disciples have had it with this rejection and opposition. The disciples have left everything, after all, and now people are rejecting the Jesus whom they have given their best energy to follow. Jesus will have none of this spirit of condemnation, however. Instead, he

reminds the disciples that the road he has chosen is difficult. Then he once again asks them if they have the faith, the fortitude and the courage to follow where he leads.

One might think that Jesus, whose movement hasn't been very successful, Jesus who has been rejected in so many places, might lower the bar a bit and be willing to take people at whatever level they are willing to commit themselves. In the church, we try to find a balance between making the Gospel sound attractive, and explaining that commitment involves making sacrifices. I firmly believe that Jesus is the answer to all the questions and challenges that we face as modern people. But Jesus does not provide easy answers to the challenging questions of life. In fact, sometimes, if we take this business of following Jesus seriously, it might lead us to more problems than we have already!

I admit that sometimes in my zeal to lure you to Jesus I stress the benefits of following Jesus without enough regard for the obligations of following him. Sometimes churches put some catchy, appealing slogans on the signs out in front of their buildings: "Come in and get a faith-lift," one sign says. Or "You've got questions? We've got answers. Come join us."

What would happen if we took seriously this morning's Gospel and advertised, "Come die with us!" or, "We have a cross that fits your back perfectly!" or, "Looking for a reason to suffer? Have we got a Savior for you!" A few years ago a man named Dean Kelly wrote one of the first books that studied and diagnosed mainline Protestant church decline in North America. One of Kelly's most controversial conclusions was that churches that demand more of their members grow and churches that demand less decline. Do we really think we can come to a deeper faith without taking seriously the demands of the Gospel? In a society where money is the measure of many things, do we really believe we can grow spiritually without making a significant commitment to God of our financial resources?

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem. He has chosen the hard road, the difficult path, and he bids us to follow him on the way. The disciples are with him, on the move toward Jerusalem. As they journey along, preaching and teaching and healing, others join them who also want to follow Jesus. It is not any accident that the earliest Christians were called followers of "the Way." (Acts 9:2) On "the Way," we learn something about what it means to follow Jesus.

The first person Jesus and the disciples meet promises to follow Jesus wherever he goes. What is Jesus' response? He doesn't say "no," but he does not sugarcoat or soft-pedal the demands of discipleship either. Jesus warns this would-be disciple that the road will not be comfortable and certainly not glamorous. Jesus points out that he has nowhere to lay his head. It is significant that in Luke's Gospel Jesus is never described as being "at home." In Luke, it is more important for Jesus and his disciples to be on their way, on the way of doing God's work. The comforts of home are secondary.

A second person appears and Jesus invites this person to follow. He makes a reasonable request: first to go and bury his father. As one who just buried his mother a month ago, this request hits close to home, and certainly sounds reasonable. Surely Jesus, who from the cross expressed concern for his own mother, would want us to take care of our families at the time of their greatest need.

Jesus' response, "*Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God,*" may sound harsh and uncaring. But I have heard it explained that the man who wanted to go bury his father really meant, "Wait until after I settle my father's estate." You see, according to the commentaries, his father was still alive. He would not be ready to follow Jesus until his father was deceased. He would not be able to follow Jesus until after he had handled his father's legal affairs and gotten his share of the estate. "Let those who are spiritually

dead worry about these material things,” says Jesus in essence. Just as home and comfort must be secondary to followers of the Christian way of life, so are family duties. There are no delays or deferments when it comes to following Jesus. Discipleship is now!

Now we have to be careful not to get too literal here. Jesus is not saying that parents and family responsibilities are not important. He is saying that whole-hearted discipleship means putting God first, putting God’s work and God’s call above other relationships. We all know too well the temptation to put off discipleship. We can find many good reasons to delay making a deeper commitment to Christ and the church. Wait until I finish high school, the young person says. Wait until I finish college. Wait until I settle down and get married. Wait until we have children. Wait until the kids are in school. Wait until the kids are out of the house. Wait until we get the college bills paid off. Wait until I retire. **Is there ever a good time to make a deeper and fuller commitment to Christ? Yes! Today is the day. The time is now! There will never be a better time than right here, right now.**

A third person comes along and responds to Jesus’ call positively, but has a seemingly reasonable request: she wants to say farewell to her family. Again, we must not take Jesus’ words too literally, but get the sense of what he is saying. “Don’t look back,” says Jesus in essence. “Once you’ve made a commitment to follow me, you need to get on with it.

Remember in Genesis where God told Lot to take his wife and family and flee the city? They were instructed not to look back (Genesis 19:17). Lot’s wife turned and looked back, and the Bible tells us she was turned into a pillar of salt (19:26). You may dismiss this story as a fairy tale, or you may grasp the deeper meaning that when we look back and focus on the past, we become immobilized, paralyzed, unable to move ahead and follow where God is leading us.

These verses in Luke are firm and clear. We can’t bend them. I wish we could! I wish we could fudge a little because life is full of so many demands and conflicting loyalties. Most often we find ourselves choosing not between good and evil but between good and good. We face many choices, options and directions. We are much more comfortable with trying to multitask and please everybody than we are with saying “no.” At least I am! But Jesus tells us that there are choices to be made between following him and doing what is comfortable, convenient and acceptable. His call is the same now as it was then: follow me and be prepared for discomfort, sacrifice and hard choices.

Sometimes it gives us a helpful perspective to look back and review where we have been or from where we have come. But this morning God is calling us to **look forward**, and to ask the question, “What does God want us to do this day, this week, this year? Where is God leading us as individuals and as a congregation?”

I remember so well the day I was called to the hospital emergency room in the community where I was serving at the time. A young woman in our congregation had been in a car accident. She was distraught. She had escaped with only minor scratches, but the woman in the other car was dead. I remember saying, “God has saved your life for a purpose.” That young woman took God seriously. She finished college. She graduated from seminary. Today she is a very effective pastor serving one of the churches in the East Ohio Conference of the United Methodist Church. **“No one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God,”** says Jesus. **Only those who look forward.**

Almost every day I am confronted by situations of human need that challenge the resources of this church. As Senior Pastor it is my job to help sort out those requests and opportunities. What is God calling us to do? Where will our discipleship lead?

I am convinced that God has given us this magnificent edifice for a reason: as the base for our operations as we go forth to witness to the love of God in the greater Heights area, in Cleveland, in northeast Ohio and in the world. Last Sunday you heard Lauren Lanphear talk about our sister church, Church of the Saviour in Hong Kong. This Church of the Saviour provided support for that church more than fifty years ago. This congregation was in mission before many of our current members were born. Could our history of strong mission support be part of the reason we are such a vibrant congregation today? More than ten years ago we were doing hands-on mission work in Africa. More recently, we have been in Haiti and Costa Rica and New Orleans, to say nothing of the youth mission work trips that have been changing the lives of youth and adults for decades.

But let us not look back! Let us look forward to what God is calling us to do, and who God is calling us to be. Every day grows more exciting. Every day God challenges us in new ways! What is God asking of me? What is God asking of you? How is God trying to disrupt our current lives in order to lead us to an abundant, eternal life?

Jesus has “set his face” to go to Jerusalem where a cross awaits him. He invites us to follow, and reminds us that there is a cross that fits us, too. With the cross comes the joy, the happiness and the peace of mind that results from following him. And beyond the cross is the new life that Jesus promises to all who are faithful.

So let us follow Jesus with hearts filled with faith, hope and love. Let us follow Jesus, **always looking forward; always looking forward** to the Kingdom of God!

Prayer: God of grace, help us not to look back as we heed your call to follow you. May our own comfort, family, and possessions be of less importance than living as your disciples. Make us fit for your kingdom. Gather and empower your whole church to serve you and our neighbors with generous hearts and willing hands. To you be all glory and honor. Amen.