

Luke 9: 51-62

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village.

57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 58 And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." 59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

No Butts About It

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Luke 9: 51-62

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The movie, *Waking Ned Devine*, is a wonderfully delightful Irish comedy about a tiny village of 52 people which discovers that one of their own has won the lottery – except that that one, Ned Devine, suffered a fatal heart attack while watching the lottery results on the television. Old Ned had no remaining kin so two of his friends decide that he would have wanted the town to share in the 7 million pound winnings so they devise a plan to defraud the lottery commission and claim the prize. (I own a copy of it and love to watch it. And it happened to be on television the other night so I caught it again. Watch it sometime when you have an opportunity.)

In a scene at the beginning of the film, Morris, a little boy about age 10, is in the quaint, country church sitting on the organ bench next to the young priest who is filling in for the regular parish rector while he is away on vacation. The dialogue between the young boy and the youthful priest goes like this with the boy starting off with his questions:

“What can ya play?”

“Nothin’, really, I just like messin’ around.”

“Can you play songs about Jesus?”

“No. I wish I could.” (protracted pause)

“So, did he come to ya then?”

“Who’s that?”

“Jesus.”

“Oh, Jesus. Well, he did in many ways. Yes.”

“But did you see him?”

“Well, not exactly, no.”

“But you’re working for him.”

“I am doin’ the best I can.”

“Do you get paid for it?”

“Well, it’s payment more of a spiritual kind, Morris.”

“Oh, right.”

“Do you think you could be drawn to the church, Morris?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, you never know.”

“I don’t think I could work for someone I’d never met ... and not get paid for it.”

Doesn’t that pretty much sum up what it means to be a Christian? Jesus – whom we have never met – asks us to give up what we have – everything – and follow him, work for him – do whatever that all implies – and then, spiritual payment aside, we don’t get paid for it. “I’m doin’ my best.”

There are no buts about what Jesus is saying in this lesson. Anyone who tries to preach this passage differently is off target. To follow Jesus, we must be prepared to go wherever he goes without any expectation that it’s going to be an easy journey –

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but this Human Being (Son of Man) has no where to rest.

“Jesus, I’ll follow you wherever you go.”

“Fine,” Jesus says. “I have no home. If I have no home; you have no home. I have nowhere to lay my head. Any bed I have is because someone lets me use theirs. You still interested?”

So says Jesus to those who want to follow him. Some of the places where Jesus leads are uncertain and even unstable. Still interested? It’s not an easy choice, is it?

Jesus then looks you in the eye. “Follow me.” How do I say no? I *want* to follow, right? I have always said I try my best to be a Jesus follower. I do good; I try not to hurt anyone; I try to live a blameless life. Maybe he’ll give me a chance to do this one thing first before I follow.

“I’ll follow, Jesus, but can I ...” Let the dead bury the dead. You must go proclaim the reign of God. “But, Jesus, it’s my dad.” Doesn’t matter. He’s dead. You’re alive. Those who are dead can’t preach; those who are alive can. Go, preach the reign of God to others who are alive. The gospel is urgent news.

This guy had an excellent excuse. In the cultural values of the times, burying one’s parents was a solemn obligation. It was a part of being obedient to the commandment to honor father and mother, and no one was exempt from honoring that commitment. On the list of excellent excuses, this man’s excuse ranks so high that often even religious obligations could be laid aside for this purpose. But Jesus’ response is direct and unquestionable: “Let the dead bury their own dead.” Jesus teaches what he has taught all along. The path that he calls us to follow is the path of life, and if you are not on that path for whatever reason, you may as well be dead like your father.

“I’ll follow, Jesus, but first ...” You want to go and say goodbye to your spouse and children, your mother and father, aunts and uncles and cousins? Then go do that and you might as well just stay with them. If you’re looking back and we’ve just gotten started, you’ll just keep looking back – yearning to see them again – anyway. So you might as well just stay there. Longing – looking backward at the things we enjoyed before we decided to follow – make us unfit for service in God reign.

This potential follower had an important excuse as well. So Jesus should have let this guy off the hook, right? He doesn’t. You look back, you get distracted from the real purpose. You can’t move forward and spread the word if you’re looking backward and tripping over yourself.

“Well, but ...” No buts about it. Stop what you’re doing. Give it all up. Follow me. This is not easy stuff, but it’s clear and direct.

“Had Jesus’ words, ‘Take up your cross daily’ never been spelled out concretely,” wrote Fred Craddock, one of today’s most celebrated preachers, “they could have remained an ethereal ideal having the effect of background organ music or they could have sunk to some meaningless act of self-inflicted pain such as walking to work during Lent with a tack in one’s shoe.”

Here, says Craddock, are the concrete details of what it means to take up your cross daily. Here are the words of Jesus as Luke tells us the earliest Christians understood them. Give up everything – house, comfy bed, warm meals, shoes and socks and that extra pair of Bermuda shorts. Walk away from friends and family – let your dead dad be buried by whoever chooses to *not* follow the Living God. There’s nothing wrong with that choice, by the way. It just means that you’re not cut out to be a true follower of Jesus – it means that although you really want to start plowing the field so that God’s way can be smoother, you just can’t resist the temptation to look back. Look back to say goodbye to those you leave behind, says Jesus, and the plow does a U-turn

along with you and you get nowhere in your journey toward the harvest.

No one ever said it would be easy!

“Do you get paid for it?,” Morris, the little boy in *Waking Ned Devine*, asks the young priest.

“Well, it’s payment more of a spiritual kind, Morris.”

“Oh, right.”

“Do you think you could be drawn to the church, Morris?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, you never know.”

“I don’t think I could work for someone I’d never met ... and not get paid for it.”

Maybe Morris is right. Could you work for someone who you’ve never met and not get a cent out of the time and effort you put in? Something tells us that we have to get some tangible reward out of whatever it is we exert effort into. We want pay if we’re going to have to give up house and family and friends and whatever comforts each of those things gives us. If I’m going to work for Jesus – be a follower of the Jesus message – then I want cash in my hand to show for the work I put in.

And, do you know what? Our attitude is no different than it ever has been in the life of this group of people who claim to be Jesus followers.

Paul reminded the Galatians that the freedom of Christ must not end up being a new sort of slavery. It should be truly liberating – personally, socially and politically. Jesus is about freedom, not enslavement to another law or another way of thinking.

“In the American context,” wrote one preacher, “we might ask ourselves whether or not the political freedom that we are so proud of has completely set us free. Perhaps it has allowed us to be enslaved by something else. As our economic freedom has played out over time, have we become slaves to the economy, to the

forces of the ‘free market’ or to the power of the consumer culture? Has our freedom of the press resulted in a culture in which we are manipulated and controlled by big corporate powers and their limited perspective? Has the freedom of the marketplace made us slaves to advertising or to the desire for profit? In brief, have we in any way become enslaved by capitalism or consumerism or bigotry or racism or any other ideology?”

The message of Jesus is far different than what most of our lives are like. The vision of Jesus is one of a group of followers who are liberated from all enslavements and entrapments, a group of people focused on the journey and the goal. Jesus invites us to be free enough to focus all of our energy on God so that we might live a life of love and service. Fulton Sheen said it like this: “We cannot be free *for* something until we are free *from* certain things.”

Luke’s Jesus is pretty direct about all this and his call is pretty startling. To follow, you must drop everything that would hold you back. The Apostle Paul knew it – “For freedom Christ set us free. Stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” The danger is that we could easily exchange one form of slavery for another without even realizing it. The challenge is to be aware of those things that get in the way of this freedom and to include in our journey the message of Jesus – the reign of God is here and now and is still on its way.

The only thing that keeps us moving forward despite our tendencies to say in response to Jesus’ call, “Hold on for just a second while I ...” is the fact that we always have hope. Hope that God will forgive our reluctance. Hope that it won’t be too late when we finally decide to commit. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11:1) Our faith is that hope which holds us true and on the path that Jesus set out for us. “Hope,” writes Henry Nouwen, “prevents us from clinging to what we have and frees us to move away from the safe place and enter unknown and fearful territory.”

If we do not have that hope, then all we have left are those butts that we offer Jesus when he asks us to surrender it all and follow.

I came across this poem recently – maybe you’ve heard it already – I’ll end with it:

One night I had a wondrous dream.
One set of footprints there were seen.
The foot prints of my precious Lord
but mine were not along the shore.
But then some stranger prints appeared.
I asked the Lord, “What have we here?
These prints are large and round and neat
but Lord, they are too big for feet.”
“My child,” he said in somber tones,
“For miles I carried you alone.
I challenged you to walk in faith
but you refused and made me wait.
You disobeyed, you would not grow;
the walk of faith you would not know.
So I got tired, I got fed up
and there I dropped you on your butt.
Because in life there comes a time
when one must fight and one must climb.
When one must rise and take a stand...
or leave your butt prints in the sand.

No butts about it. Commitment to Jesus is a serious undertaking, but one which anyone who wants to follow can accept with confidence ... and hope.

Amen.