

Pentecost 3C 26 June 2022

Luke 9:51-62

St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you, Saints, from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' 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.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Let's pray: ...

Today's gospel is a difficult one. It's confrontational and there doesn't seem to be any wiggle room. "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We're either looking forward to God's kingdom or we're not. We're either responding to the call of life or we're not. We're either open to the coming future or we're not.

Jesus is putting us on the spot and it makes us uncomfortable. He's challenging us to seriously question the direction of our life, the values we claim to uphold, and how we're living with respect to those values. Jesus is asking us to examine our lives and our motives rather than the Samaritan on whom we'd like to call down fire from heaven.

By Samaritan I mean those who look, act, and believe differently to us; those who don't share our particular religious or political beliefs; those who aren't from 'round here; those who really make our skin crawl or get our backs up, for whatever reasons. And if you're not sure who your Samaritans are, think about the people who do things, say things, and drive particular ideologies that push your buttons. Turn on the TV channel you can't stand watching. Picture the face of the one you crush in the arguments that go on in your head. Think about "woke" culture and social engineering.

Today's gospel won't let us turn away from the people and situations that're right in front of us or the future that awaits us. Jesus recognises and understands the tension in which we live. On the one hand we exuberantly declare to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." On the other hand, we say to him, "But first let me go and"

I know that you know what I'm talking about. Think about a time when you've been aware of that tension? Is anyone willing to share that experience; a time when you were being pulled in two directions, the way of Jesus and some other way? When have you said, "But first let me go and...?"

Saints, it's easy and simple to follow Jesus in principle. Love your neighbour as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven, share the gospel. This is the way of Jesus. This is the direction in which he's set his face. This is the road to Jerusalem. We acknowledge these teachings to be true and good. Yes, it's the path we too want to follow in principle.

The difficulty for us is that it's so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life, than in principle. We're all in favour of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until we face the unlovable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch - the Samaritan in our life. Then our storyline changes and we include the caveat, "But first...."

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where he's going, who's included, or what he's offering. It doesn't bother him who we are, where we're from, or what we've done or left undone. Citizen or foreigner, believer or nonbeliever just don't seem to matter to Jesus. He simply says, "Follow me." He doesn't make room for a "but first" in his life or the lives of those who wish to follow.

“But first” is the way we put conditions on the unconditional.

- Yes Lord, I will love the other but first let me go and see who the other is, whether she or he is deserving of love, whether I like him or her, whether he or she agrees with and is agreeable to me.
- Yes Lord, I will open my door and welcome the stranger but first let me go and see who’s knocking, how different he or she is from me, what she or he wants, what I’m risking.
- Yes Lord, I will forgive another but first let me go and see if she or he has acknowledged her or his wrongdoing, is sorry for what they did, and has promised to change.
- Yes Lord, I will give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what’s in it for me.

But first....

We are amusing creatures, aren’t we? Jesus calls out the way we hedge our bets by backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door; how we walk backwards into the future, not wanting to see or deal with what’s before us; hand to the plough and looking back.

Why do you think Jesus says, “No” to this? Why set our faces toward Jerusalem and follow Jesus without distraction or exception? Because Jesus knows the way that loves your neighbour as yourself, loves your enemy, welcomes the stranger, visits the sick and imprisoned, feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, gives the thirsty something to drink, turns the other cheek, forgives not just seven times but seventy times seven, is the gospel and the narrow gate and the hard road that leads to life [Matthew 7:14]; to heaven. The “but first” life has a wide gate, an easy road, and leads to destruction [7:13].

I don’t want to back my way through this life. I don’t want to live a butt first life. And I hope you don’t either. I want us to turn and lead with hearts that love the unlovable, forgive the unforgivable, welcome the stranger, and give without seeking a return or even a thank you; or in simpler words, live, breathe, and speak, the gospel of God’s saving grace.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. But there is pure gospel in this account: Jesus shows us that the way to life is to follow him. Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. He proceeds through the narrow gate and stays on the hard road. He sets his face toward the cross. Jesus isn't distracted by human concerns or peripheral things, but trusts in God and his plan for salvation and the regeneration of his creation.

The cross can be a hard burden for us to bear, especially when we contemplate the horror of Jesus' humiliation; yet, God chose it as the ultimate way to express his love for humanity and restore us to his favour. When Jesus rebukes us, he does so out of love not out of anger. Like a loving parent who warns their child not to touch the hotplate on the stove, God warns us that the way to avoid the many things in life that can harm us, is by keeping our eyes fixed on heaven. Temporal concerns pass away but God's love is eternal.

So that we don't miss the boat, Jesus implores us to look at the ways in which we're backing through life. He wants us to name the people and situations to which we have turned our backs, and acknowledge that we do sometimes live a "but first" life. This is the first step to repentance and forgiveness, which leads to the Father's bosom; the place of peace.

I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without a "but first"; surging forward for the sake of feeding hungry souls with Jesus' sweet gospel, the Bread of Life that we are so privileged, joyful, and thankful to receive.

Honestly, I think it would be risky, scary and look pretty crazy. But when I look at the world, read the news, and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So, what if we were to take a better risk, face a better fear, and live a kinder craziness? What if we were to follow Jesus, leading with our hearts and not "but[t] first?" Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.