

## Sermon on Luke 9:51-62

Let us pray: Gracious God, we come before you this morning to reflect on your word for our lives. I pray this morning that if not because of me, than in spite of me, your voice is heard. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, our Rock and my Redeemer. AMEN.

Our reading this morning, from the Gospel of Luke, sheds light on a portion of the gospel that we don't often want to discuss.

Jesus and some of his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, approaching a Samaritan village. Like he often does, Jesus sends some of the disciples ahead of the rest of the party to get some rooms and refreshments ready for the weary travelers.

But the messenger disciples are rejected by the people in the village. They're not allowed to stay for the night, to buy some bread for a snack as they walk, or even step foot in the village. Understandably, this is upsetting.

This section of Luke follows a very busy time for the disciples – they've been healing many and feeding thousands, Peter and John and James have witnessed Jesus' transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, and Jesus has been talking about his own death and doing lots of teaching within the group. They're tired, and confused. Their brains and their feet hurt. They want a place to rest. What's more, this may be the only village for miles. And they can't rest in this village, because they're not allowed in it.

It doesn't help that this is a Samaritan village – a people with whom Judean Jews shared some common faith, but also lots of enmity. So the disciples react in a predictable way – their minds turn to violence. James and John, eager to exercise some of the 'power' they have as Jesus' disciples, beg him to allow them to bring down fire from heaven to consume the whole village. They're thinking: "Why should we be rejected? Don't these people, these Samaritans, know who we follow?" James and John want to make the Samaritans pay for their bruised egos.

I like to think that Jesus makes a face like this: "Are you serious?" he's thinking. "We've been on all of these journeys together. We've had all of these discussions about God's love. We have seen and witnessed and spoken about wonderful things done in God's name. And still you have violent thoughts? They clearly don't understand like I was hoping they would!" Jesus is baffled, and disappointed. So he tells them off. In a nice way. Our translation says that "he rebuked them." Some early manuscripts give Jesus these words: "You do not know what manner of spirit you are of, for the Son of God has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them." "Duh, James and John," Jesus says. "Get with it. Pay more attention. That's not what I'm about."

Jesus uses the journey that follows as yet another chance to speak to the disciples about what it costs to follow him. Someone says to Jesus: "I want to follow you and be your disciple, no matter where that will take me." Jesus replies cryptically: "Even animals have a regular place to stay, but as you have just seen, I don't have a home. Be warned."

Another responds to Jesus' call to discipleship, but has a condition: "let me give my father a proper funeral." Jesus responds with a disturbing message: "Let the dead bury the dead. You are called to the kingdom of God, the kingdom of life."

Yet another would-be disciple chimes up. “I’ll answer the call, Jesus. Just give me time to say goodbye to my friends. I don’t want them to think I’ve abandoned them. And Luke reports that Jesus said these words: “You can’t plow a field when you’re looking backwards. Look forwards towards God’s kingdom and you’ll be successful.” And that’s all we hear.

It’s important to note that because of Jesus’ recent transfiguration, witnessed by some of the disciples, they’re especially thinking about Jesus’ connection to the Prophet Elijah in this passage. Indeed, this whole section is reminiscent of the 2 Kings passage that we’ve just heard read.

Jesus, as Elijah often did, sends some messengers ahead to prepare a place for them. Jesus has told them twice now that he will be “received up” just as Elijah was “received up.” He’s intentionally set the travelers on a path to Jerusalem, where this “receiving” will likely take place.

The disciples have Elijah on the brain, so when a Samaritan town causes them offense, it’s natural to understand that they’d like to do what Elijah did in their shoes – in 1 Kings 10, he destroys a Samaritan town with fire from heaven. But Jesus has tried, over and over again, to show the disciples how he’s different from Elijah. There are parallels in their life stories, certainly, but Jesus’ actions continually announce that his ministry is not about destruction and judgment, but love, compassion, mercy, and hope. Jesus is something more than a great prophet. Violence is the work of evil, not the work of Saviors. Yet they still don’t get it, and react as Elijah-disciples and not as Jesus-disciples. Jesus has some work to do, teaching about discipleship.

So what does it mean to be a disciple? A disciple is one who, by their very nature, follows and learns from another. Usually, this revered figure is a holy, wise, or learned individual, and often all three. The learned individual has things to teach, the disciple has things to learn. It’s a good relationship, a pouring out by one and a filling up of the other. By their nature, disciples devote their lives to the teaching of another person.

For Jesus, though, being his disciple is more than just learning about what he says. It’s practicing it, and practicing it radically.

We often interpret this text from Luke to say several things: being a Christian means that you should have no big possessions (like a homes or cars), and few possessions at all, really. It means that you should detach yourself from those most important to you and travel endlessly, preaching the Gospel. It means that you aren’t able to care for your family, or have friends. You can’t “look back” but only forward, and if you do, your faith is lacking. All of that is pretty radical.

This may be what Jesus is *saying*, but I don’t think these things are what he *means*. He’s making demands of the disciples that seem harsh and unreasonable, and he’s doing so to get their attention. He is challenging the disciples to see things from another perspective – from his perspective. He is communicating clearly: making manifest the Community of God on earth is the highest priority. Making God’s love manifest throughout the earth is your number one goal. At the same time, he’s being subtle - he’s making these demands to make a point. Jesus is presenting us with the costs of discipleship.

We may not have a ‘home’ or always be comfortable. Some places may not welcome us because of what we believe or who we are – countries, other people, or even churches. Earlier in this passage we see a perfect example of this – the Samaritan village doesn’t welcome Jesus and the disciples in. The Samaritans, perhaps, have heard of Jesus and his radical teachings and wish not to be involved, or worry that he’ll stir up trouble. Sometimes being Christ’s disciple means that we’re not “invited in the village” because of what we believe. Sometimes the Spirit may call us to unusual tasks – things to do or say that we might not want to do or say but that we feel led towards for some unknown and unexplained reason. And *sometimes* we might be without a fixed place to stay because we are truly led here and there by the Holy Spirit, preaching the Gospel.

We may not ‘fit in.’ It’s human nature to desire to ‘fit in,’ to be the same, to carry the same purse, to send your children to the same schools, to vote for the same political parties (or not to talk about it if you vote differently), and to even worship in the same church with the same people. It’s easy to fall into that trap – acting from a desire to be seen as normal, and it’s hard to break from that mold – we’re raised, in many respects, to fit in. Being different is often frowned upon, and rejection sometimes follows. People perhaps choose not to spend time with you anymore because of who you are. But by its very nature and radical calling, being a disciple of Jesus Christ means that we’re not *meant* to fit in. This is Jesus’ challenge for the would-be disciple who wants to say goodbye to her friends, lest they forget her: “Don’t let being liked or disliked determine your actions.” Jesus says to us: “It’s not important what others think of you – if they like you or not. It’s important what I think of you, and I love you the most of anyone. So if you’re going to be my disciple, please *me* first and foremost. Follow my call for your life, and you’ll be okay.”

We *may* be at odds with our biological family. Our family, often the closest people to us, may not agree with what we do or what we say or how we believe.

We *will* be at odds with what tradition dictates. Our faith will call us to do things at odds with what we’ve been taught. Jesus calls a young man to be his disciple, but he’s got some family obligations to attend to – perhaps his father has already died and needs to be buried, or perhaps he needs to be taken care of before he dies. Then the young man can become a disciple. Respect for the dead and following proper burial practices were essential for Jews. Jesus knew this, and yet he asked something incredibly difficult of this young man: leave the dead to bury the dead. Follow me instead.

Do I think Jesus is asking each and every one of us to disrespect and disregard our families and leave them behind? No. I *do* think that’s a challenge for *some*. And I do believe that with this comment, Jesus challenges traditional ways for doing things. This young man was looking to the past, to how things have always been done, to his traditional familial obligations. He was letting the way things *have always been* blind him from the way *things could be*.

While Jesus explains the costs of discipleship, he is also challenging a past-oriented society to become a future-oriented society. He even says to the last potential disciple: “No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” What happens when you’re pushing a plow and you look behind you while your hand is still on the plow? The furrow that the plow creates is going to be crooked.

Jesus is not telling us to throw away our past, to throw away all of our traditions, to ignore our families and where we've come from. We should always let the past inform who we are. If not, how would we know how to push a plow in the first place? But Jesus is trying to point the disciples in one direction. They're focused on the wrong things. Jesus is telling each would-be disciple, quite firmly: "The past is in the past. You cannot let it overtake your present. You cannot let it dictate who you are today. Live vibrantly in me, now. I am your new tradition. Let my ways become your ways." Being Jesus' disciple, once we've made the decision to walk in God's ways, is to be our top priority.

The work to bring about God's community on earth is demanding, and the calling is absolute. There will always be excuses why we shouldn't follow Jesus on our life's journey, why we shouldn't be true disciples. We don't have the time or the energy or the circumstances just aren't right to fully commit our lives to God. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, perhaps next year the time will be right.

When we make the decision to follow Jesus, he tells us: Your new life starts now. Our old ways of relating to others are no longer appropriate. "No more violence. No more hatred and disdain. Now love, peace, and forgiveness are the rules by which you govern your life." Our old ways of living aren't going to work anymore. "You have to go where I lead you – into a new vocation, into a new part of the country, into a new ministry of the church." Old ways of relating to family and friends aren't going to work anymore. "Don't let tradition dictate who you are once you follow me. Following me should be the guide to everything you do."

From everything that we've seen and heard, Jesus would make a terrible salesperson. Think about it: You're going to buy bananas from the street vendor. You've taken the time to pick some out that look particularly delicious, and you think you'll quite enjoy them for a snack tomorrow. You take your bunch of bananas to the sales lady, and instead of taking your money, she launches into an explanation about the bananas you want to buy. They're not the bananas you think you're buying, she says. They taste strange and you may not like the different flavor. I'm not sure you can handle these. Beware before you buy!

This is what Jesus is doing - he's not selling it the way we expect it! He's not saying any of the things we want to hear or are used to hearing from someone trying to convince us of something – in fact, he's doing quite the opposite. He's telling us the truth – he's laying it out on the line. People aren't going to understand you – sometimes, not even your family. People are going to resent the decisions you make. Your friends might think you're odd or weird. It's going to be really difficult. But that's the life I expect of you if you're going to follow me.

There were times in my life, at college and even after, when I really considered giving up on the Church. Not on my faith, not giving up on Jesus, but in giving up on the Church, on an organized method of worship. I didn't agree with some of the decisions my church was making, and I questioned my role within it. I would think to myself – why are you putting yourself through this, Katy? What's in it for you? It would be so much less stressful if you weren't in the Church, if you left it all behind and worshipped Jesus in your own way, on your own terms, without all the mess. That would be the easy way, yes.

But a life of radical discipleship calls us to more than 'easy.' I'm not saying that a life spent with Jesus will never be easy. I'm saying it should, and will be, different than what we're used to or

what we expect. So why do it, then? Why should we be a disciple of Jesus Christ? Well, Jesus doesn't even say why in this passage, so we're going to have to make an educated guess.

I think that to follow God's word and God's call for our lives makes us whole. To answer the call to discipleship in Christ helps us to make sense of this crazy world we live in. Despite the difficulty it may bring, being a disciple of Christ gives us the tools to live a full and richly blessed life.

When we become a disciple of Jesus Christ, when we make that decision, we take up the mantle of Christ just as Elisha took up Elijah's mantle. We assume the responsibilities, but we also assume the rewards.

Danger and uncertainty around the globe often means displacement and loneliness and confusion, and discipleship in Christ means a community of believers who lighten our load and share our burdens, helping to light our path along an otherwise dark way.

We go through personal and professional crises. Discipleship, faithfulness to the Way of Jesus means that we will never go through that pain alone. We are surrounded by a community of people who dearly love us. We are enfolded in the loving embrace of God.

Humans wage war, yet following Jesus means we can legitimately hope for peace that surpasses all understanding, because we've seen it happen, and because each individual is responsible to make that peace manifest.

Each of us around this room have witnessed and sometimes experienced injustice. Jesus gives us the words to say and the things to do, and the very motivation to combat that denigration of the community of God – to stand up in solidarity with our brothers and sisters against what is wrong, and to demand what is right.

Our world is often suffused with hate, but Christ gives us the abundant love that dispels all hatred. I could go on and on.

Through discipleship in Christ, all of the mess, the difficulty, and the misunderstandings fade away. We are partners together through it all, through the most harrowing yet most rich parts of life. Sarah Dylan Breuer, a woman whose Lectionary blog I sometimes read, puts it like this:

“Luke underlines that our family is *all* our sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ, and as human beings our family is *all* in the human family, as we're all God's children. As counter-cultural as it was and is, Jesus taught (and lived) that we are called to care about and for EVERY mother or father and EVERY child as we would care for our own mother or father or son or daughter. ALL of our relationships are to generate the fruit of the Spirit; there is no one who because of a lack biological family ties or marriage or our assessment of "deserving" toward whom we are licensed to behave with "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy.”

As a disciples of Jesus Christ, as those who seeks to walk in his ways and love his people, we become a family, a community richly blessed by God. Yes, the demands are great. But so is the reward. Each one of us around this room is the reward. Jesus is the reward. Love is the reward.