

Sermon: Just One More Thing Before I Go

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Luke 9:51-62**

The Gospel writers often refer to Scripture when they're trying to make a point, which seems to be the case today. This passage from Luke is meant to remind us of the time when Elijah called Elisha to be his disciple.

Hebrew Scripture stands on its own. Each book, each story, has its own time and context. The original audiences would have been familiar with the backstory for any given passage. In our day, not knowing that backstory, we might miss some of Luke's intended meaning. So, the lectionary is doing the work of looking back for us, in a sense. We just have to dig in and find it.

In the passage from First Kings, Elisha becomes Elijah's disciple – and later his successor – when he takes the all-or-nothing step of slaughtering his oxen. He made sure that he couldn't go back to his old way of life. It was almost a snap decision.

In the Gospel reading, someone offers to follow Jesus without waiting to be called, having no idea what Jesus' life is like, so Jesus brings him down a little bit. He explains that no one can call themselves to such a life as his. Then Jesus does call a man who, if he follows, must break the law to do so. Only the Christ can call us in this way. Some people feel that Jesus is telling the man to 'let the *spiritually* dead bury the *physically* dead. Other people think that the father is not yet dead, and that the man is only procrastinating in following Jesus.

The third man, like the first, offers to follow Jesus, but only on his own terms. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that when Jesus calls us, he makes a situation where faith is possible, saying that 'the road to faith passes through obedience to the call of Jesus.'¹ Bonhoeffer calls this 'costly grace,' because following Jesus Christ costs us our current life in exchange for true life.

Earlier in this chapter, Jesus told his disciples that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, be rejected, killed, and on the third day be raised. Then he said, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me" (Luke 9:22-23). Following Jesus is a life-long, every-day calling. It is a way of life that we are literally called to, and not a rational career move that we make in order to hedge our bets.

Luke begins today's passage by saying, 'As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus *resolutely* set out for Jerusalem' (9:51, NIV). That's the New International Version. 'As the time approached' has a different feel to it than, 'When the days drew near,' which comes from the version I read earlier.

Either way, we get the impression that Jesus is making a beeline to Jerusalem, with no stops, no interruptions. But, in Gospel time, it takes him almost ten chapters to get there. Luke even drops the subject until about halfway through chapter 13 when he remembers to tell us that Jesus went through one town and village after another as he made his way to Jerusalem.

But first, immediately after today's passage, Jesus sends out seventy disciples in pairs to the surrounding area, and then waits for them to return. In saying that Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem, Luke means that Jesus knows that's where his ministry will end; setting out for Jerusalem implies crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, so Jesus is not really in a big hurry.

But, as I said, that's ten chapters from now.

Today, Jesus is rejected by the Samaritans 'because his face was set toward Jerusalem,' and not toward Mt. Gerizim, which was the Samaritan equivalent to the Temple. Jesus was just passing through. When James and John ask him if they could command fire to come down from heaven to destroy the Samaritans, some ancient manuscripts add, 'just as Elijah did.' And that's another connection with Hebrew Scripture; Jesus is the new Elijah.

But Luke's audience had just heard Jesus say, 'Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them' (9:5). He is here to preach peace, not vengeance.

So, what does it mean for us to *follow* Jesus? God knows we can come up with any number of excuses *not* to follow him. Procrastination can be an art form. As Elijah and Jesus both knew, discipleship is an all-or-nothing calling. Sometimes, we're not free to follow. The priorities in our lives take precedence over making a leap of faith. Very few people live it the way Bonhoeffer lived it, or the way Mother Theresa did.

The message we get from Luke is, when you have your hand on the plough and look back, the row begins to wander; in the same way, when we accept Jesus' call, our focus must only be on the straight-ahead to a future harvest.

We also know from the Gospels that the disciples, like Jesus, will experience rejection and persecution, beginning with this Samaritan village. Not much has changed in 2,000 years.

People are leaving their churches all across the United States and Europe. To me, that means that those who were once called to follow Jesus no longer are, because you can't be a Christian on your own. Christians need community. They need to gather every now and then to remember Jesus and to thank God for all that they have. We have to wonder, then, why people are willing to walk away from Jesus and their faith community.

So, back to my original question, when we say we follow Jesus, what might that mean?

It might mean that we follow his teachings. That would mean fully understanding his parables and applying them in every appropriate situation. It might also mean that we are actively teaching the way Jesus did, and healing the way Jesus did, and maybe even casting out demons the way Jesus did. The job description is pretty vague about how to do that.

But Jesus also healed people by reconciling them to the community and to their faith. That's something we can do, with training, which is what Jesus was up to with his disciples.

We can also follow Jesus in emulating his rejection of violence as a way to resolve a dispute. The Gospels give us plenty of examples where Jesus started out on the wrong foot but ended up on the good side of a relationship. The Samaritan woman at the well, for example, or the woman begging for scraps at the table. If Jesus can overcome a built-in prejudice, the Gospels imply, then so can we.

Walk the extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Non-violence is a form of civil disobedience.

Above all else, following Jesus would also have to mean that we take to heart the two greatest commandments. The first is to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' And the second is like it, to 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Matthew 22:37-38).

We don't need an invitation from Jesus himself to follow him. We just need to make sure it is the only thing on our to-do list when we accept it. Being free to follow gives us freedom.² To follow Jesus is to make a journey of faith. Everything looks different when we know we are loved by God.

Amen.

¹ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. New York, NY: Touchstone Book, 1995, 63.

² Craddock, Fred B. *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, 144.