

Pentecost 3-June 26, 2022

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Luke 9:51-62

“Following Jesus” *Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad*

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is turning the page in his ministry as he turns and sets his face toward Jerusalem where he will suffer death on the cross for the sins of the world. As he turns toward Jerusalem, he encounters several people who he uses as examples for us today about what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

Jesus begins by teaching two of his own disciples who needed additional schooling on discipleship. Jesus had just sent messengers ahead of him to a village in Samaria where he had planned on staying. When we hear about someone who is a Samaritan, we often associate such a person as someone who will go out of their way to demonstrate unconditional care for a neighbor. However, the good Samaritan that Jesus told the parable about was not like the Samaritans in this town. Samaritans in general and certainly those in this village were not about to welcome outsiders and especially not Jesus. These Samaritans worshiped at Mt. Gerizim and they associated Jesus with the rest of the Jews who worshiped in the temple in Jerusalem and because of this difference in worship practices, they did not want Jesus to stay in their town. This rejection was not a surprise to Jesus. He may not have remembered when he first was rejected, but you recall from the Christmas narrative that there was no place for the parents of Jesus to find shelter on the night of his birth. Last week you heard another time when Jesus was rejected. After Jesus healed the man of many demons, they were not impressed with this act of mercy, instead he was run out of their town. And in today's reading, once again, no one offered Jesus a place to lay down his sweet head.

This is one of the lessons of discipleship that Jesus taught from this experience. Jesus said that foxes and birds can find shelter in the world, but do not be surprised when you are following Jesus that you will not be welcomed with open arms, but rather you may be rejected for your beliefs and sent away. Jesus showing kindness and mercy to the undeserving is the reason he is not welcomed by those who feel they have done something to deserve his attention.

James and John, who were disciples of Jesus, had seen how Jesus, the soon to be savior of the world, was rejected from this village. These two brothers were known as the “sons of thunder”. Their father was Zebedee and there is little known about him that would connect him with thunder, but what James and John said after Jesus was rejected may be one of the reasons for their nickname. James and John, like the other disciples, had been given some authority and power as disciples. They had used this power to cast out demons and to heal people. But when Jesus was rejected by this village, James and John, the “sons of thunder” wanted to use their power to destroy these people by sending down fire from heaven. This desire of James and John to destroy people who did not agree with Jesus brought about another opportunity for Jesus to teach a lesson in discipleship.

Followers of Jesus do not use their gifts to destroy the church. They use them for the benefit of the church. Also, it is never in the job description of a follower of Jesus to be the judge and jury for what someone seems to be doing wrong as James and John wanted to do. A follower of Jesus sole purpose is to proclaim the

kingdom of God to all people. Jesus had the authority and ability to send fire down to this village and destroy it, but he too came to save and not to condemn and causing these people to perish in a fire on earth would forever put an end to any future opportunity to proclaim the saving power of Jesus when the time might come when they were ready to listen.

The next person that Jesus encounters to use as an example about what it means to be a follower of Jesus may have come up to Jesus singing the hymn "I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back." that likely was written based on this passage. However, we believe that we follow Jesus because he has called us, not because we have decided to follow him. But in this case, Jesus didn't say to this person, "Follow me." The man told Jesus that he would follow him wherever he would go. We never hear about man or any of these people for that matter again. We don't know if he followed Jesus or fell away from him. But we do know that he did not walk alongside Jesus carrying his own cross to Golgotha. We also know that he was not buried in the tomb with Jesus, nor did he come out with him on Easter morning. It is safe to say that this person did not follow Jesus **everywhere** Jesus went. We also are reminded from this one encounter, that people who claim to choose to follow Jesus like to take credit for what they are doing rather than give credit to Jesus who they are called to follow. People who claim to follow Jesus like to talk about the crosses they are bearing for Jesus rather than give thanks to Jesus for the cross that he bore for them.

The very next person that Jesus runs into **is called** by Jesus. Jesus said to this person, "Follow me." This person did not respond in the same way that other disciples did when they were called and dropped whatever they were doing and followed. James and John, the sons of thunder, were such disciples who left their boat and their father sitting in it when Jesus said, "Follow me." This person instead put a condition on Jesus' call when he said, "**But first**". But first, I need to go and bury my father. Some bible scholars suggest that this person's father had not even died yet. This person's willingness to follow Jesus was going to be on his timeline. It may not happen until his father had died and until he had received his inheritance. This person was not willing to trust that Jesus would provide for him, so he wanted to wait when he had a little in his bank account for security before following Jesus.

The final person that again seems to have made a personal choice to follow Jesus also adds a condition to his commitment to follow. This person tells Jesus that he wants to go home and say goodbye to his family before he begins to follow him. Following Jesus for this man is again going to be done on his terms. He wants to decide if and when he is going to follow Jesus. Jesus reminds this man when he tells him that those who look back as they plow are not fit for the kingdom of heaven. Following Jesus has nothing to do with what you have done in the past. Following Jesus is in the present and focusing only on him.

Jesus points out that following him is not an easy path. In fact, it is impossible for any of us to fully follow Jesus. It is not a path that any of us would choose to take and we, like the people Jesus encountered, who claim to follow Jesus will do so only if on our own timeline and terms. Following Jesus does not give us permission to send down fire from heaven on people we believe Jesus wants us to destroy. Following Jesus is simply hearing what Jesus has done for you and proclaiming this good news to others. When Jesus says, "Follow me", he means "follow me". There is nothing more important for you to do, like saying goodbye or attending a funeral of a family member. These are important things to do, but they are not first. Jesus tells you today, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, then all these other things will be given to you." Amen