

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday after Pentecost
June 30, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

1 Kings 19:15- 21

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 9:51–62 NRSV

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 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?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Follow Me

Many of us have experienced a great deal of life. And, we recognize that there are situations in our lives that demand strict obedience:

- In the military, when you encounter the opposing forces, you hear, “Take cover!”
- In school days, when you play with a toy, the teacher said, “Drop that!”
- If you had a strong parent in your life, you quickly responded when you heard, “Come here!”

These are **commands**. They start with a verb called an **imperative**: a word that demands a certain action. The word and **action** are directed at someone specific: You, the **listener**. This form of verb is common in nearly every language. It does not name a subject, such as “He” or “She” or a given name. It is clear from the situation: You are the one receiving a command, or a **specific demand**.

This form of language persists throughout these verses in our New Testament lesson this morning. This is a time of **teaching** by Jesus, as he and the disciples and many others begin to travel toward Jerusalem. Along the way, Jesus has done quite a number of remarkable things.

- He has **healed** a leper and a paralyzed man. The crowd was so large in the house, that the paralyzed man was lowered through the tile roof in order to get near Jesus.
- Jesus had feasted with a hated **tax collector**, commenting on the significance of the sabbath and dietary laws.

- He had given a famous sermon we call the **Beatitudes**.
- He healed the **servant** of a Roman soldier, a centurion: the same as a Captain or Major in the Army or the Marines today.
- Jesus **raised from the dead** the only son of a widow. A widow depended entirely on her son for support. Jesus very likely saved the widow's life, as well.
- At another dinner, **a woman bathed his feet** with her tears, dried his feet with her hair, and anointed them. Rather than send her away for this brazen display, Jesus gains insight into her life, knowing that she has sinned. He audaciously **forgives her** and thanks her openly in front of curious and astounded onlookers at the banquet.
- Jesus **calmed the storm** on the Sea of Galilee.
- He exorcized the **demons** in the madman near the sea, and the demons went out of the man and into a herd of swine, who leaped into the sea and drowned.
- He **healed the woman** with the bleeding, ending a life of illness and restoring her to a rightful place among her family.
- He healed the daughter of the leader of the local synagogue, **fed the five thousand**, sent the disciples out on a mission on their own and celebrated their return.
- In addition, on a mountaintop Jesus had been **transfigured** by God's presence as witnesses saw a vision of Moses and Elijah.

Now, I have listed all of this for us this morning, because the writer of *Luke* wants us to know that Jesus has accomplished about **all that he could** in Galilee. It was time to move on to the **fulfillment of his ministry** and his time among humankind. It was time to travel in earnest to the city of Jerusalem. This is where our scripture lesson begins. It is the beginning of a long journey through rough country to get to Jerusalem. There are an awful lot of new experiences that will happen along the way. Even more importantly, Jesus has more words to say, more **wisdom** to convey, more **miracles** to perform.

If you are overcome with curiosity about all of this, start reading at the next chapter (*Luke 10*) and note how **the pace** quickens as this gospel unfolds the full story of **the Gospel** for us. Having said that, what do we find is important about this particular lesson, these verses that we read.

- Do they provide a **code** for living a good life?
- Do they paint a rosy picture of **bliss** for believing in Jesus?
- Do they show the full compassion and **kindness** of Jesus that we ordinarily associate with him?

If you paid attention, you probably know the answers to all of those questions: Jesus tells those who ask him that life with him is difficult, **uncertain**, and insecure. In view of this, think about how many times have we been told in print and in worship that our path is clear and our goal is **easily attained**, if we only believe? Jesus says that there are truly **difficult decisions** to make when we follow him as **true disciples** on this road, this journey. The dead are to bury the dead. There is **no great comfort** there. In fact, it is upsetting and disruptive.

Apparently, this is the full intent of this message. Jesus is the **Great Disruptor**. Not a mild-mannered, lamb-of-a-man, but someone who opposes authority, who challenges conventional thinking, and questions the legitimacy of social norms. To the authorities, the

priests, the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Romans, he is a rabble-rouser. In today's terms, every law abiding Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopalian pastor would caution their parishioners to stay away from him. Indeed, the voice of Jesus is pretty harsh, even **condemning**. Once we start this time with him, there is no looking back.

Some of you remember the Sunday school teacher who had the full attention of the five and six year-old children in her care. After a time with their crafts, it was time for the *Bible* story. And, it was a difficult one. Taking a breath she forged ahead.

“Now, children, you remember that Abraham had a nephew named Lot, and they had divided what they had. And, Lot and his wife and family went to a city named Sodom. “Well, some wild things went on there that we can't talk about, and those things did not make God happy. So, God sent some folks to Lot, and they told him and his family to get out of town as quick as they could.

“God was about to destroy the city of Sodom!

“And, they warned them, do not look back! You must leave everything behind.

“Well, Lot and everyone took off and were making an escape. Just as God was busy destroying the city, Lot's wife turned around to look back. Maybe, she thought she would miss everything there.

“But, when she did this- she turned into a pillar of salt!”

Now, thinking that she would need to cheer up the children after such a sad and scary story, the teacher was relieved to see Johnny waving his hand in the air. Quickly, Johnny said,

“I think I got it, Teacher. Last week my Mama was driving, and she turned into a telephone pole! That made my Daddy pretty mad, too.”

Well, there is only a little humor in this story above, but these words of Jesus have even less. In fact, he uses sarcasm pretty freely, especially in these answers to the first two questions. Jesus has always been pretty serious about his work and his ministry. Now, the writer of *Luke* wants us all to understand the sincerity, the honesty, the unrelenting passion, and the determination that comes with total commitment to God.

Like my football coaches might say, Jesus does not want the impossible from us who follow him. He wants everything we have.

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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Luke 9:59-62 NRSV

Why does Jesus insist that we drop everything and follow him?

- Jesus is looking for full devotion: **Transformation**, is a better description. We know this because of the powerful changes among the disciples and other followers of Jesus after his resurrection and the gift of **God's Spirit** at Pentecost.
- Jesus is confident that those who stay with him will find a **greater purpose** in his ministry. We need to understand that Jesus is not pre-selecting these “candidates.” They are coming to him, unsolicited, just as they are. They are asking him if they can follow with the disciples. The truest lesson in this: Jesus uses **common people** to do **uncommon things**.

- Jesus is not looking for the most talented: Again, there are **no resumé**s, just the willingness to **engage with others** in whatever way they can.

Now, like many other stories about Jesus, we are not told what happened to any of these persons who engaged or challenged Jesus. Until recently, I assumed that these individuals slumped their shoulders, looked at the ground, and **walked away**. But, that is not stated here. For all we know, they could have reconsidered and joined right in with Jesus and his followers after hearing these words. In fact, I rather like this **missing piece** of the story, because like many of you I get discouraged by these **expectations** that Jesus puts before us.

Here is where things get personal for us. That feeling of **inadequacy**, being unable to live up to the anticipated demands, had kept me out of pastoral care and ministry for most of my adult life. But, eventually the **call of God** came through, and that has me before you all today. It has made all the difference in my life and in my **ministry**. I know that many of you have had a similar experience.

But, there is another aspect that we need to consider about Jesus, Son of Man and Son of God. **Jesus knows** what is in the heart of these people. That same aspect of insight was played out in the **Hebrew scripture** we read this morning. God told **Elijah** to go and tell **Elisha** that he was **chosen by God**. Apparently, Elisha got the message in a big way. He immediately left home, took the prize oxen, and likely the only plow the family had, and sacrificed the oxen. It sounds as if he used the plow for a butcher's knife and the wood handles to fuel the fire, enhancing the sense of commitment and urgency of the moment. That sounds extreme, but that is just what the writer of *1 Kings* wants us to understand: This is **total commitment** to God.

Jesus showed the same thing in **choosing the disciples**: They left their nets and boats and **followed him**. There is no mention of a formal farewell to family. They did not sell the fishing business, nor did they make out instructions for the family inheritance. They simply **left all they had**. Jesus said, "Go!" And, **they went!**

Jesus knows what **faith** can do. The Son of God knows all the benefits possible when we live **in communion** with God and in communion and **community** with one another:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30 NRSV

Like our words of scripture this morning, these words of Jesus describe our response to the **load** we are to take on **with Christ**. It does not describe a cool breeze, a hammock in the shade, or a good book to read. These words fail to describe an easy path to a lifetime of happiness in the usual sense of comfort and ease. Instead, Jesus describes transformation into **new life** and new paths and new work and **engaging ministry**.

As the story of **Jesus approaches Jerusalem**, all four gospels depict Jesus warning these devoted followers that **great suffering** lay ahead for them. They would receive a taste of it shortly after these verses: Jesus sent seventy of them out on their own to preach, teach, and heal throughout the land. Often, they were rejected, but they persisted and **great things** were done. They were turned away, but there was **great rejoicing** at what was achieved.

So, that leaves us all in here, and whoever will take up this Word after today, looking for **something positive** in this rather negative sounding, even discouraging, passage of scripture.

Like those following Jesus on the road to Jerusalem:

- Are we **living** in response to **God's will** in our lives?
- Are we **ignoring** the challenges before us?
- Are we interested in the **future**- interested enough to become a part of it?
- Are we open to a life of **uncertainty** that comes with the certain and true life offered us in Christ? We need to consider this, because that is **how God works** in our lives!
- Are we living in excitement and **anticipation**, knowing that new and untried experiences are **awaiting** you and me?

Because, you and I are called each day to **work for God** in this: God's **kingdom**.

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