

Luke 9:51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 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?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them. 56 Then they went on to another village.

Luke 9:57 As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

58 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." 59 To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60 But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

61 Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62 Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

JERUSALEM

When we read the story of Jesus we all know how the story is going to end.

We know that the time will come when he will be crucified, dead and buried. We know that on the third day he will rise from the dead. We know that he will ascend into heaven. We know that one day he will come back to judge the living and the dead.

We know all that. We say all that each week when we repeat the Apostle's Creed.

But, today in the middle of Luke's gospel in the middle of the long hot summer Luke is reminding us of this basic fact. It's a long time to Lent and Easter, but in Luke's mind Lent and Easter and the Ascension and the Last Judgment color the story of Jesus from the beginning to the end.

This is where I think many of us make a mistake in our understanding of Jesus. Each week I preach on just a small piece of the gospel, a little snippet of what Jesus said and did.

But, this morning Luke is telling us in the middle of his gospel, “Remember, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He is determined. His face is set like flint toward the city that rejected the prophets and the city that will soon reject him as well.”

In other words Jesus is not a victim. Jesus has deliberately taken a road that will lead to conflict in Jerusalem. And in Luke’s gospel the beginning of that journey starts in Samaria.

Jesus of course talked about this sense of divine destiny. He was the Messiah, God’s warrior, heading to Jerusalem to take on the powers that be.

SAMARIA

But now he was in Samaria, and the Samaritans didn’t like the idea that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem.

We read that when the disciples entered a village of the Samaritans to get things ready for Jesus’ arrival, they said, “We don’t need Jesus. We’ve heard that he’s on the way to Jerusalem. Fine. We have nothing to do with Jerusalem. Tell Jesus not to bother with us. He’s not welcome here.”

Now to understand why the Samaritans were so touchy about Jesus going to Jerusalem you have to know a bit of history. The Jews rejected the Samaritans because they were a mixed race, the result of intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles.

And in the face of this rejection the Samaritans said, “Okay, you won’t accept us; we don’t accept you. We’ll set up our own place to worship, and you can keep Jerusalem.”

The animosity between Jews and Samaritans was deep. Think of the conflicts in the Middle East or Northern Ireland or some such hot spot, and you get the idea.

But, incredibly Jesus does not even wish to leave the despised Samaritans out when it comes to the Kingdom of God. In fact it seems like Jesus does not want to leave anyone out. He brings the gospel to sinners, tax collectors, and last week he even brought the gospel to the other side of the tracks (or in this case the sea) to the Gentiles.

And now he is bringing the gospel to the Samaritans.

I imagine that the disciples were not too happy about this. It was frightening enough to cross the sea and encounter the unclean Gentiles, but the idea of going into a Samaritan village and asking for hospitality from enemies ... that truly must have been a hard pill to swallow.

MOVING ON

They didn't want to do it, but they did it for Jesus. And they got the response they expected. The Samaritans wanted nothing to do with Jesus. He was headed to Jerusalem, and as far as they were concerned he could just keep on going.

None of us like to be rejected. It's humiliating. And the natural reaction is anger.

James and John, the well-named Sons of Thunder speak for the disciples when they say,

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and destroy those pesky Samaritans?” I guess they were thinking about how Elijah destroyed the prophets of Baal. Surely these inhospitable Samaritans deserved the same fate.

But, Jesus will not defeat those who reject him by force. He strongly rebukes the disciples for their judgmental attitude. Instead of harming those who reject him, Jesus just moves on.

I think this is an important lesson. You may remember that when the disciples go out on their own to preach the gospel, Jesus tells them,

“If you’re rejected, just shake the dust off your feet and move on down the road.”

And I think that’s what we need to do as well. Preaching the gospel of Jesus is never about hurling threats of judgment toward those who reject the message. Sometimes it just means making the offer and moving on.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. He is not going there to take the town by force. He is going there to die for sins of the world. Jesus is willing to give up everything, even his own life for the sake of the ones he loves.

Rejection does not end the ministry of Jesus to the Samaritans or to anyone else for that matter. The grace of God in Jesus Christ overcomes the sins of the world.

Indeed, when Jesus gives his disciples the commission after his resurrection, the command of Jesus to his disciples is to be his witnesses, to bring the gospel to those in Jerusalem, Judea, *Samaria*, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

The Samaritans may have rejected Jesus. But, Jesus did not in the final analysis reject the Samaritans. In our lesson for today, Jesus moves on to a town that would show more hospitality, but the disciples of Jesus would come back.

God was not done with the Samaritans, and God is not done with us either.

It’s difficult following Jesus. He keeps moving on to the next village. Just when we think that our lives are settled it’s time to go somewhere else for the sake of the gospel.

When we travel with Jesus we are always on the way to Jerusalem. Our lives are not our own.

THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

A soldier puts his or her life on the line and goes where he or she is told to go.

That's the nature of being in the military. You give up certain things in order for the sake of service to your country.

Following Jesus is similar in that way.

But, there are some important differences. Victory is not achieved through judgment or destruction. Victory is achieved through nonviolence and grace.

Nevertheless, the cost of discipleship is always very high.

When Jesus set his face to go toward Jerusalem he didn't have any illusions about how he would be treated. Earlier in the ninth chapter Jesus told his disciples,

“The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised ...If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” (Luke 9:22-23)

And in our lesson for today Jesus once again is very honest about the cost of following him. On the way to the next town Jesus tells one who would be his follower, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests. But, the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.”

His rejection in the Samaritan village attests to this fact.

DON'T LOOK BACK

But, the harshest statement comes next. Someone wants to follow Jesus but first he wants to go and bury his father. And Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead. But, as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

William Barclay suggests that this might not be as harsh as it sounds. It's possible that the man's father was alive and well, and that he was asking to stay with the family indefinitely until his father passed away. That could be years.

I prefer that interpretation. It makes Jesus seem less extreme and demanding.

But, other commentators suggest that this radical statement should be interpreted in light of the kingdom of God that comes in Jesus. The days are drawing near when Jesus will be taken up.

Even sacred family obligations take a back seat to God's kingdom.

That theme continues in the verse that follows. Another potential disciple tells Jesus, "I'll follow you but first let me goodbye to those at my home." But, Jesus will have none of it. He says, "No one who put his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

This last analogy is the key to understanding this passage. I've never plowed a field with a pair of oxen. Come to think of it I haven't plowed a field with anything.

But, if I did I hear that the key to plowing a straight furrow is to keep you eyes fixed on the horizon. If you look back or become distracted in any way you will not be able to plow a straight furrow.

Now we might say, "So what?" But, in an agrarian society plowing a straight furrow was a sign of an accomplished farmer. And the people who first heard this saying understood that very well.

We might say that it's hard to arrive at your destination if you're always looking in your rear view mirror.

Following Jesus, especially during this critical time required a sense of priority. It required giving up everything in order to focus on the one important thing. It required leaving the past behind and embracing God's future.

The apostle Paul said something similar. In his letter to the Philippians he talked about the importance of Christian discipleship, the importance of following Jesus single-mindedly.

He wrote, "... this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

MOVING ON TODAY

In other words the essence of Christian discipleship is moving on with Jesus. And that's what this whole passage is about.

When you think about it how well we do in life is determined by how well we are able to move on, to forget the past and strain forward toward the future.

A friend told of how his sister had the opportunity for a great job in Germany. But, there was a problem. Her grandmother didn't want her to go. In fact she laid a guilt trip on her granddaughter saying, "I'm going to die soon, and I don't want you to be far away when I die."

Now the grandmother had many friends and family nearby who were very supportive. And this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. The granddaughter took the job in Germany, and the family supported her in that choice. They strongly believed that for her that was the right choice to make.

The same sort of dynamic is at work in the call to discipleship.

The call of Christ is more important than anything else. Following Jesus is more than just giving lip service. It is a demanding call. It's a call that keeps us on the move.

The call of Jesus demands that we leave behind our anger over past injustices. The call of Jesus demands that we leave behind the hurt we feel when others reject us. The call of Jesus sometimes demands that we even leave behind the ones we love.

That's the tough one. Several years ago I met a woman who had been a missionary to Africa. Finally they came back home to the U.S. and her daughter got married and had children of her own.

But, then this daughter and her husband felt the call to become missionaries in a far away place. Even though mom knew that it was no use fighting the call of God she admitted that she prayed that God would stop them from going. She didn't want to be so far away from her grandchildren!

And then she thought about how she had done the same thing to her mother. She accepted the call of Christ for her children and grandchildren. But, she said that she still didn't like it!

I suspect that's how it will be for most of us. There is a cost to following Jesus. That was true for those first disciples and that's true for us as well. But, we still don't like it.

LEAVING OUT JESUS

And that message seems to be out of step with the mindset of today's church. A preacher told of a conference in which a new media campaign was introduced. The theme was "Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors."

The production was a big hit and everyone applauded. But, one delegate stood up and said, "These are all attractive TV ads, but I notice they never mention Jesus."

The media consultant replied, "Our research has shown us that word (Jesus) is a turnoff for many in our target audience." So, let's not talk about Jesus so that we won't be rejected, and we'll be successful.

No wonder they don't want us to talk about Jesus. In a world focused on self-help and self-gratification Jesus talked about rejection and moving on and sacrifice.

Jesus said, "Blessed are you poor, God's kingdom is yours and woe to you who are rich, you've had your reward."

Maybe we should forget Jesus and focus on a prosperity gospel instead. Let us pray the prayer of Jabez, "Increase our holdings." And let us forget about the poor in our cities and our impoverished countryside.

The consultant was right. If we want to decrease our chance of rejection best we forget the name of Jesus. But, then what is the point of being a Christian?

THE MIRACLE OF DISCIPLESHIP

A group of students were studying the Bible on a college campus, nine weeks on the gospel of Luke. One young lady was lamenting the fact that there were so few Christians on campus. She said that sometimes it gets lonely to be a disciple of Jesus.

Another student responded, "Well this is my first Bible study, my first time really getting into what Jesus really said and did. And I'd say it's a miracle that you can get anyone to follow a guy who talks like this."

It is a miracle that Jesus gets anyone to follow him.

But, here you are this morning. Most of you have read the hard words of Jesus before. And yet you still say, "Here I am Lord. Send me."

How did that happen? Why are we so interested in following the Jesus, the one who leads us to rejection and never lets us settle down?

Maybe it's because there is hunger in our heart that cannot be satisfied by anyone else.

I think many people are hungry for a life with meaning. People want to find something that is worth dying for.

TEACH FOR AMERICA

William Willimon told of a woman who came to the campus of Duke University to recruit students for Teach America. She had a unique, almost Jesus like approach to the task.

She said,

“I don’t know why I’m here tonight. I can look at you and see that Duke is a first class university. I know that this is a BMW school.

You’re all smart and ambitious. You can go on from here and get jobs on Wall Street, in government and industry.

And here I am trying to talk you into throwing away some of the best years of your life teaching in some of the worst schools in the country for about \$20,000 a year. We had two of our teachers beaten to death last year in their classroom!

I can tell by looking at you that you’re not interested in that.

So I won’t keep you. But, if by chance any of you think that you’re up for this, I’ve got brochures and you can come up here and get one. Meetings over.”

With that the students jumped up and pushing and shoving one another mobbed the front and began fighting over those brochures.

And Willimon said that he thought to himself, “This woman’s good.”

Yes, the hard words of Jesus caused some to reject him and leave him. The sacrifice was too much.

And yet some disciples left everything, home, family and job to follow him. Some disciples forgot all about their past so that they could follow Jesus into the future.

It was never easy. And sometimes it looked like it was all for naught. But, for those who had the courage to follow it was a life changing experience.

It was salvation.

Today we have gathered on a hot summer day to hear these hard words of Jesus once again. Jesus calls us to throw caution to the wind and just follow him.

And we answer once again, "Here I am Lord. Send me."
Amazing grace and demanding discipleship go hand in hand.
Thank you Lord that you are still calling us to move on.

Amen.