

June 26, 2022, The Rev. David Slyter

Today's gospel lesson is a difficult one. It is one of those passages that we would be tempted to skim over because it's confrontational and it doesn't leave much, if any, wiggle room. But let us hear the word of the Lord this morning.

Luke 9:51-62

We have three sets of "I will follow you" statements in today's passage.

The first is a man walking on the road with Jesus and the man says, "I will follow you wherever you go." 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."

As we learn to follow Jesus, then we will find that we are increasingly uncomfortable in this world. We, too, find no place to rest our head in a world that's devoted to success and wealth and excess and power, when we become increasingly devoted to righteousness, justice, love, peace, holiness, and goodness. We live in this world as one that belongs to another world. To follow Jesus means that we will find it is uncomfortable in this world.

The second is Jesus asking a man "Follow me," the man replies "Lord, first let me go and bury my father," which I learned from my trip to Israel, meant that his father had been dead for a year and placed in a necropole (family tomb) and it was customary to go back and remove the bones and place them in an ossuary within the family tomb. Or perhaps he meant, my father is on his death bed, or let me wait until my father is dead (with no indication of when that might be) so I can fulfill my obligation to him upon his death.

Now, if this man's father is dying on his death bed, then one, why isn't this man by his father's side already? And two, let's just say this man's father did in fact just die. Well, then you must ask, how would this man have even come to know that? Because in ancient times burial happened on the same day that someone died because they couldn't preserve the body. And so, if they're out traveling towards

Jerusalem, then how would this man have come to know so quickly that his father had passed in the first place? And how would this man even be able to entertain the idea that he'd be able to get back in time to oversee the burial of his father on the same day while he's traveling on foot?

No, the truth is more likely that this man's father may be old, and it may be a concern for this man, but his father isn't dead, and his father isn't on his death bed. It's because this man has different motives. Now that following Jesus is going to take him to places, he never expected and require him to do more than he ever intended, now he's beginning to reconsider. His question about burying his father gives the appearance of family devotion, and in part that may be true.

But what happens when this man's father dies? He gets an inheritance. He's set up for life, and he wants to secure it. What he's really wanting to do is to go back and get his affairs in order, saying, "Jesus, I'll follow you, but first, let me get life just situated how I want it. I'll follow you but let me get squared away financially." Let me take care of this situation so that, then I'll be even more freed up to follow you. No doubt as he's reconsidering following Jesus in his own mind, he's sitting there thinking, "Jesus has no place to lay his head. That sounds frighteningly un-secure. So, I need to take matters into my own hands. I need to set myself up so that I am secure."

And lastly, we see this third man come up to Jesus, and he says, "Lord, I'll follow you, but let me first go and say farewell to those at my home." And Jesus says, "No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

No one can look back. And he's giving a farming reference here, how when you plow a field you wanted to try and cut straight rows to plant crops. And as you're trying to cut those rows you can't turn around and look back because you'll start to veer off course. It's for the same reason when you're driving, you don't turn around and stare at the person in the back seat. You'll veer off the road and you won't end up where it is that you're trying to go. It's a very simple metaphor, and yet Jesus is simply saying that, just like him, you must set your face forward.

We're either looking toward the kingdom or we are not. We're either responding to the call of life or we're not. We're either open to the coming future or we're not.

Jesus is calling us into question and that's never easy, fun, or comfortable. He is calling into question the direction of our life, the values we claim to hold, and how we are living and embodying those values. He is asking us to look at ourselves rather than the Samaritan on whom we'd like to call down fire from heaven.

By Samaritan I mean those who look, act, and believe differently from us; those who do not hold our particular religious or political beliefs; those who are not from these parts; those to whom we are opposed and in conflict with, for whatever reasons.

Today's gospel won't let us turn away from the people and situations that are right in front of us or the future that is coming to us. Jesus recognizes and holds before us the tension in which we live. On the one hand we say to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." On the other hand, we say to him, "Yes, but first let me go and" You probably know what that's like. I know I do.

When have you experienced that tension? When has it felt like you were being pulled in two directions, the way of Jesus and some other way? In what ways have you said, "Yes, but first let me go and...?"

It's easy and simple to follow Jesus, in principle. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. These are values Jesus holds. That's where Jesus is going. That's the direction in which he has set his face. That's the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good. Most of us probably agree with those values. It's the road we too have chosen to travel, in principle.

But it's so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life than in principle. I suspect we are all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until

we meet the unlovable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch, or the Samaritan in our life. Then it's a different story and that story usually begins with, "Yes, but first...."

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where he is going, who is included, or what he is offering. He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we are from, or what we have done or left undone. For him there is no why, no conditions, attached to love, hospitality, forgiveness, or giving. He does not allow for a "but first" in his life or the lives of his followers.

"Yes, but first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional:

- Yes, I will love the other but first let me go and see who the other is, whether they are deserving of love, whether I like them or not, whether they agree with and is agreeable to me.
- Yes, I will open my door to and welcome the stranger but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different they are from me, what they want, what am I risking.
- Yes, I will forgive another but first let me go and see if they have acknowledged their wrongdoing, is sorry for what they did, and has promised to change.
- Yes, I will give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me.

Yes, but first....

It's as if we are backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door. It's as if we are walking backwards into our future, not wanting to see or deal with what is before us. It's as if we have put our hand to the plow and looked back. And we already know what Jesus thinks about that.

I don't want to back my way through this life. And I hope you don't either. I want us to turn and lead with our hearts, that deep heart that loves the unlovable,

forgives the unforgivable, welcomes the stranger, and gives without seeking a payback or even a thank you.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. I wish I could resolve this in some neat and simple way, as much for myself as for you, but I can't. It's about resolving ourselves, resolving our heart. That resolution is not a simple or one time decision. It's a way of being in this world, a way of relating to others, a direction for our life. It's a choice we make every day.

That means looking at the ways in which we are backing through life. It means naming the people and situations to which we have turned our backs and acknowledging that we do sometimes live a "yes, but first" life.

I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without a "yes, but first?"

I think it would be risky and scary and look crazy. But as I look at the world, read the news, and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So, what if we took a better risk, faced a better fear, and lived a kinder craziness? And what if we were to let that start with you and me, today, in our lives, in our particular situations, and with whoever or whatever is before us? And let's not be the ones to say, "yes, but first..."

May it be so!