

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost • June 26, 2016

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 9:51-62

“To Follow”

It's time to get going. I suspect that you know how that feels. It's that time when you don't have the option of putting it off any longer. It's that time when you've graduated and now need to say goodbye to familiar people and places as you move on to the next part of the adventure that is your life, heading to a new school or a new job or a new city. It's that time when you have to focus and turn away from that which would distract you or keep you back from what lies ahead. It's time to follow the future.

Jesus means business. There's not really any way to get around this kind of harsh truth as we meet him in the passage we heard from Luke's Gospel today: He's on a mission, and it's time to get going. It's a turning point in his life on earth as he “sets his face” to journey up to Jerusalem. From here on out, he's heading towards the destiny for which His Father sent him. It's not going to be an easy journey to accomplish some simple task. People will reject him, including some of those who've been traveling with him and learning at his feet. Before it's all done, he'll be abandoned by everyone. After hearing Jesus today, though, no one could say he didn't tell them that following him would be a tough road.

You are here to follow Jesus – even if you don't know it yet. Jesus is speaking his word to you today, calling you as his disciple, calling you to follow him. That's what discipleship is: **to follow Jesus**, being shaped by him, becoming better and better equipped to be the person that God has called you to be, living in restored relationships, and carrying the gift of God's grace into the lives of the others. So as he sets his face towards Jerusalem, what do Jesus' words and actions tell us about discipleship, what following him will look like for us in this time and place?

Look at what happened at the Samaritan village. The people there didn't welcome a prophet who was heading to Jerusalem. Long at odds with the Jewish people, Samaritans didn't accept Jerusalem as the place where God should be worshiped. By turning away the messengers, the people of the Samaritan village couldn't receive the master whose way the messengers prepared. **To follow Jesus, you must receive his messengers and listen to them.**

That's probably not news to you. You're here. You've already listened to one – or many – of Jesus' messengers. But another part of discipleship is taking what you've heard and sharing it with someone who needs to hear the good news about the Savior, God's Son who gathers us together and knows us each by name. You and I aren't going to Jerusalem as Jesus did: he went to accomplish his mission to save all people from sin and death. And because he did that, the people of our congregation are welcoming an opportunity to share God's love in Jesus as we offer this summer's Vacation Bible School program, “Barnyard Roundup!” Our VBS teachers and staff, along with all of you who have helped make ready for this coming week's activities, are serving together as instruments through which the Holy Spirit will deliver God's love to children – most of whom come to VBS from the surrounding community.

Discipleship isn't just about telling, though. It's not even *mostly* about telling. Jesus' disciples James and John would have done well to remember that. They were so angered at the Samaritans' rejection of Jesus that they wanted to call in a divine airstrike on the village! Jesus would have none of that, though, so he set them straight. In those few times when we hear of Jesus' rebuking his disciples, it's most always calling out a way in which the disciples aren't actually following him. They have their own understanding of what's acceptable, independent from what Jesus has been teaching them. Rain down fire on a village to wipe it off the face of the earth? Sure! Sounds effective! But that's not what Jesus came to do, nor is it what he would have his people do. **To follow Jesus, you must be aligned with him.**

As Christ's people today, we're surrounded by countless voices and would-be authorities who have their own understandings of what's acceptable, independent from God's instruction. However, that doesn't mean that you should hate them, yell back at them, or apply force against them in punishment. Being aligned with Jesus means looking at others as Jesus would. He calls us to deal lovingly with those who disagree with us or reject us, even as he did all the way to the cross. You and I will do well to listen – and to live in – St. Paul's words of encouragement to discipleship from today's Epistle reading: “through love serve one another,” (Gal. 5:13) and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal. 5:14)

Discipleship isn't usually convenient. Look at Jesus' interactions with those men he encountered as he journeyed. He makes the nature of discipleship pretty clear. The first man, one of those rarely recorded

ones who offered to follow Jesus without him first calling them, should have gotten the picture right away. Jesus' mission is his priority. He's left behind hearth and home to do what needs to be done. Should his disciples expect any differently? The second man has obligations to fulfill. Yet as Jesus somewhat jarringly replies, the mission of God's kingdom is of greater importance than even familial and societal expectations. There's no time like the present to be about the work of discipleship! **To follow Jesus, you must reject complacency and be willing to make unpopular or difficult choices.**

You and I can make a whole laundry list of excuses as to why we could put off doing something important until tomorrow. And when whatever it is that needs doing might cause discomfort or inconvenience, our list of excuses can get longer and longer. Following Jesus, though, isn't something that any of us should put off. Moreover, we don't really have any excuse, because Jesus is the one that makes discipleship possible for us in the first place. While the culture around you might challenge those who would follow Jesus, and the world at large rejects following Christ as unnecessary or even backwards, they aren't concerned about what's ultimately good for you. They don't care about you. But God does: that's why Jesus went on his mission in the first place.

To follow Jesus, you must always look to Jesus. That might seem somewhat obvious, but consider the third man that Luke recorded in today's Gospel reading. He was willing to follow... **but** he had family and friends that he couldn't just leave. The exact nature of Jesus' reply might get a little lost on you if you've never had to plow a field the same way they did back then. The person at the plow had to focus intently on guiding it while an animal pulled it along; if he were turning his head to look behind him, even for a short time, he'd end up with a crooked furrow. Discipleship means focusing on Jesus, staying on guard against a wandering heart and mind that want to go back to life that doesn't follow Jesus. That's not an easy task, especially in a culture where "distraction" is the name of the game. Here's the thing, though: Jesus has already done what's needed so that you can follow him.

You are free to follow Jesus. Last week, we heard of Jesus bringing freedom to a man who'd been possessed by demons. He's set you free, too. As Paul wrote: "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." (Gal. 5:1). Jesus completed his journey to Jerusalem and fulfilled his mission on earth, the mission to restore humanity's relationship with our Creator. You get to share in that victory. It changes everything. **Discipleship is living in Jesus' victory over sin and death.**

The Holy Spirit has brought you here, even as He brought those three men who Jesus met along the way. We don't know if they ended up following him. We do know, though, is that Jesus has called us to follow, to be disciples. Let's follow him together.

Amen.