

“Follow Me”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Luke 9: 51-62

David Lose writes: *At the turning point of C. S. Lewis’s beloved The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, several significant characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as potent as they are succinct: “Aslan is on the move.”*

In today’s reading from the Gospel of Luke, something similar is happening as these verses, which open the second half of Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry, herald Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Having preached, taught, and worked miracles, Jesus suddenly hears like a silent clarion the call to turn toward Jerusalem, and the rest of Luke’s narrative depicts his steadfast journey there. In short, Jesus is on the move.

While Jesus’ face may be set to Jerusalem, he does not take the most direct path. In fact, there is almost no discernible logic to the collection of stories and incidents Luke relates, and there is no easy way to identify the route Jesus followed. Luke’s concern, it turns out, is primarily neither narrative nor geographical, but theological: the stories Luke shares reveal the character of Jesus and, in turn, the Father who sent him and the mission Jesus has been sent to accomplish (David Lose, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 191).

Indeed, this passage we have read today marks a clear demarcation in the Gospel of Luke. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop with Elijah and Moses, and Peter, James, and John witness this other-worldly event. It’s almost as if the transfiguration is God’s way of visibly and publicly blessing his son’s mission and ministry. And now, in our passage today, Jesus literally changes his posture and position, “setting his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). It is a face of determination and commitment, fueled by the knowledge that his mission must be fulfilled through what awaits him on the cross.

We might forget that hard reality when we first read these two paragraphs out of Luke. What probably hits us square in the face are Jesus’ harsh rebukes to these disciples, and his seemingly uncaring attitude toward a grieving man. “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (9:60). Really, Jesus? Is that the best form of pastoral care to show this man? I have a feeling if I said something like that to a grieving member of the church, I’d find my office belongings out on the sidewalk!

What we come face-to-face with here is not a pastor with poor people-skills, but a Messiah who must fulfill his mission. Elaine Heath writes: *In this*

text, Jesus begins in earnest to prepare his disciples for what lies ahead. The tone is sober. Jesus has already begun to warn the disciples that he will be betrayed and put to death (9:21-22, 44). Partnership with Jesus in his mission will require rugged commitment. The disciples must learn how to respond to rejection and persecution. To be a Christ-follower is to walk the way of Jesus regardless of the outcome (ibid).

And in each of these three scenes, we witness how Jesus prepares his disciples for what lies ahead of them, by showing grace, conviction, and single-mindedness. In the first scene, Jesus sends the disciples into a Samaritan village to preach the gospel. The Samaritans, we know from that famous parable, were considered outsiders to the Jewish community, and this was definitely a case of the disciples stepping out of the box to follow their teacher's instructions.

But the Samaritan village did not welcome the disciples – far from it! And James and John are angry and upset: “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (9:54). Jesus’ followers wanted violence and retribution against those who would not receive God. But Jesus does not act as the world would act; “But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village” (9:55-56). *The use of violence to enforce Christian faith is counter to the spirit of Christ (ibid).*

In the second scene, Jesus encounters someone who “will follow (him) wherever (he goes)” (9:57). It almost sounds like someone who is overtaken by the euphoria of all that’s happening. Well, Jesus kind of throws cold water on his euphoric profession with the following: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (9:58). Jesus has no place to call home, no physical space that is his; he is reliant on others’ hospitality. *God incarnate is essentially homeless, apart from the hospitality of others. What does this mean for his followers? No one can cling to possessions and faithfully follow Christ (ibid).*

In the third and final scene, Jesus is met by both a man whose father has died, and another who wishes to say goodbye to his family. Both are invited to follow Jesus, and they profess a willingness to do so, but they need to take care of this important business first. But Jesus offers a different view. Following him requires total and singular focus, not being beholden to the past. Elaine Heath writes: *Commitment to discipleship leads to a testing of loyalties on every front. Jesus’ shocking words about the father’s funeral seem harsh and unloving . . . His point is that when other loyalties to family, community, and tradition claim first place, disciples will compromise the call on their lives.*

In this text the disciple is called to live in union with Christ in Christ’s life and mission, in the power of the Spirit. That is, disciples are called to a sanctified life, “setting their faces toward Jerusalem,” utterly abandoning themselves to the love and purposes of God . . . The journey to Jerusalem, beginning with the Samaritan village, will show them how to travel the apostolic way in the spirit of Christ (ibid, 194).

What does faith mean to us? Is faith something that we “utterly abandon ourselves to the love and purposes of God?” Is faith something that guides us on “the apostolic way in the spirit of Christ?” Is faith something that gives us the power to live in total union with Christ in his life and mission in this world?

Or is faith something that holds the same place in our lives as entertainment, material possessions, and family commitments? Has faith become for us something that we call upon only in times of crisis, but when life seems to be going well, we neglect to nurture and deepen our faith?

What would we say to Jesus if he came up to us and said, “Follow me?” What would Jesus say to us if we offered up only excuses?

Richard Shafer writes: *Faith can be expressed and experienced in a variety of ways, but there comes a time in each one’s journey when it is necessary clearly and unequivocally to declare the depth of that commitment. God’s place in our lives is neither a matter of convenience nor something that can be taken for granted or assumed. Unlike other human endeavors, our commitment to God is a heartfelt matter, rather than the result of a logical decision-making process.*

As our faith grows and matures, our life in Christ slowly merges with our life in the world. We come to realize that living by the Way is more than just a private endeavor, no matter how meaningful. In order to have true meaning and integrity, it must be our identity; we must recognize and live it in every part of our being. No matter what our gifts or imperfections, the mature Christian must willingly walk alongside Jesus, even if that journey compels us to make difficult choices that a more secular existence might otherwise avoid.

The Christian journey does not demand that we reject our responsibilities to family and vocation but, rather, encourages us to see those needs in the light of our faith and through the lens of our deepening commitment to Christ (Richard J. Shaffer, Jr., *ibid*, 190-194).

As I said yesterday at the wedding of Matthew and Ashley Whitaker, “The path of discipleship is not necessarily a cake-walk; but it is also not a path you have to walk by yourself.” Our Lord demands of us our whole commitment to him, just as he was singularly committed to his mission by setting his face on Jerusalem. But with his high expectations also comes the knowledge that we do not have to walk this journey of faith alone. We are always and forever surrounded, uplifted, and nurtured in faith by God’s Spirit, which is made manifest in the community of faith, the church. As Christ’s disciples, and as the Body of Christ, we are empowered to set our faces on Jerusalem, and to utterly abandon ourselves in the love and purposes of our loving, living God.

Thanks be to God for Christ’s invitation to all of us to come and follow him. Amen.