

Following Jesus

Luke 9:51-62

Faith Community
March 4, 2001

Introduction

Most people see Christianity as fairly easy. To be a Christian means to believe certain things and behave in an acceptable way. If you believe in God and that Jesus was his son, and you act decently towards other people, you could pretty well meet many people's criteria for being a Christian.

Several years ago I talked with a woman who had visited our church on a Sunday morning. She indicated that she would be coming to church regularly, but that her husband didn't go to church. "He's a good Christian. He believes in God and lives a good life. He just doesn't go to church." That got me thinking about what a "good Christian" is. Is it someone who believes that God exists, and keeps his nose clean?

I

In the scripture we just read, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, and begins the journey that will take him to his death. Jesus realizes the pain and humiliation that lies ahead, even though his disciples probably don't. The text is clear in reflecting Jesus's determination. Even though he knows how terrible it will be, he is undaunted. He will go forward no matter what obstacles are in his way. As he travels he meets three potential disciples and has a conversation with each of them. Apparently they have heard him, believe in what he is saying, and are interested in following him. Each of them is dedicated to Jesus to some degree. Through Jesus's conversation with them we can understand better what it means to be a disciple.

II

The first person Jesus talks to is excited about the possibilities of being a follower of Jesus. "I will follow you wherever you go," he gladly exclaims. He is committed and anxious to be with Jesus. He wants to be involved, he is energetic and filled with enthusiasm. "I'm ready, I'll go anywhere with you Jesus." Here is an ideal follower – one who is willing to follow anywhere, who will enthusiastically do his work – but Jesus's response doesn't encourage him; in fact he brings him up short. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus's answer is tough. Jesus peels back the idealism. He rips off the rose-colored glasses. "Look, it's going to be tough, you'll be homeless." Jesus is surprisingly direct and honest. He doesn't pull any punches.

When I first began in the ministry and had to recruit people for jobs in the church I tried to play down the difficulty of the work I was asking people to do. "It's not that hard, and it doesn't involve too many meetings." I figured if I could get them to say yes to the position then they would be able to deal with it once they got involved. I soon learned that is the wrong approach to take. We are much better off being up front with people, realistic about what is involved and how much time it will take. It works out a lot better for everybody if we put our cards on the table at the very beginning.

Jesus deals directly with this man, giving him honest, straightforward, even harsh information about what is involved with the work he wants to do.

III

Jesus approaches the second person, and says to him, "Follow me." The man responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." That certainly seems to be a reasonable request. Would any of us deny a person who needed the time to bury his father, and deal with the grief involved? Again Jesus' response is hard. He says, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." How can he deny a person's right to bury his own father and to mourn? What are you asking for Jesus?

In the Jewish tradition burying your father was one of the most critical functions for a son. But more than that, those of us who have lost a parent know how difficult the grief, hurt and emotional impact of that experiences is. It is often something that affects us for years. The loss of a parent involves a long grieving process. Jesus seems to be callous and unfeeling, even disrespectful here. Is this man to leave his dead father? Is he to walk away from his family in this time of severe loss?

Some commentators have suggested that perhaps the man's father is not yet dead. It may be that what he is saying is "Wait until my father has died, and I have taken care of those kinds of things, and then I will come and follow you." Maybe he is suggesting that in a different stage of his life he will catch up with Jesus and join his disciples. This explanation only softens Jesus demands a little bit.

IV

The third person says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Surely a person should have the right to say good-bye to a family before he goes off for an indefinite amount of time with a traveling evangelist. But again Jesus seems to be unreasonable. He says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now wait a minute! If we've had any experience with saying good-bye to the people we love, we know how heart wrenching that can be. If you've had to say good-bye to a child, or sibling or parent, you know how hard it is. Is there any parent who has had a dry eye when driving home from dropping off your child at college for the first time? We know they are coming back, but we also know it is not going to be the same ever again. They have entered a new stage of life where they will be doing a great deal without us. It is a necessary, but very difficult time.

This person Jesus is talking to only wants to say good-bye to his family. That's a reasonable request. It is only the decent thing to do. Imagine the flack he is going to take from his mother if he doesn't stop by and say farewell!

But Jesus consistently puts discipleship before family. You remember his words, "Anyone who loves mother or father more than me is not worthy of me, and anyone who loves brother or sister more than me is not worthy of me." What kind of family values is that!

Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We know that looking back over your shoulder when you are trying to plow means not only that the rows aren't straight, but you are crossing over the rows you already have plowed. It ruins the work you are doing. When we concentrate on where we are going, and keep our eye on the task in front of us, we go straight and the work is done right. Jesus is saying: when we get on board, don't look back at what might have been, only look at the goal ahead – the work to be done.

Conclusion

I don't know about you, but I find these words hard and frightening, and disturbing. I'd like to find some loopholes, or some way to make them more reasonable and easier. I'd like to find some explanation that would make what he is saying here more palatable. Lots of people have tried to do that over the years. Commentaries are filled with explanations that try to make Jesus words easier to swallow. But in

the end they are not true to Jesus word. Jesus apparently meant what he said. As much as we don't like it, these words are tough and meant to be. Jesus isn't trying to see how many new disciples he can recruit before the end of the year, he is trying to call serious people, who understand the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay that price. He is looking for people who know what they are getting into and still want to go ahead. But then we have to remember the context of these words of Jesus. He has set his face towards Jerusalem – he is heading into the city where he will certainly be killed. He is staring the high cost of faithfulness in the eye. He knows how much it will cost. So he isn't sugarcoating it for his disciples

Are we able to hear what he says? Are we able to follow where he had led us?

Amen.