

## **Luke 9:51-62**

David sat across the table from the pastor at a local fast food establishment. This deeply spiritual young man was talking to the pastor about a decision he had made. He would go to medical school rather than seminary. The pastor nodded, thinking that it was a good decision for him. But something made him wonder, and he probed for the reasons behind the decision. It was then that David started talking about his faith journey during college. "I attended one church," he began, "where the people talked a lot about serving others. But when it came right down to it, none of them were doing it very much. They were serving each other, serving themselves. There was so much to do in the community and they ignored all of it.

"I went to another church for a few Sundays in a row, and suddenly I got a letter from the pastor telling me that I was a member. When I asked her about it, she said, that since I already had a church I would be an associate member of her church. I just don't get it. I don't want to be part of a church with such low expectations. I don't want to be part of a church that makes it "easy" for me to be Christian. I want to be part of a church that challenges me to think, to act, to be so much more than I already am."

The pastor began to say that there were more than two congregations out there when David cut his response short. "Not to be rude or anything pastor, but can you honestly tell me where I can find the congregation that I'm looking for? I want one that wants to make disciples, not members. If I am going to give my time to

something I want to know that it will be well spent, that I will make a difference in the world. So, where is that church?"

His pastor drank in all that David said. He knew the pastor of the "church of the three Sunday member rule." She had bragged to others about how many new members she had, that people were looking to belong and her church was growing. The pastor wondered what she would say to David. He thought of his own congregation, which had nurtured this young man's faith and inquisitive mind. Would even they measure up to his expectations?

Most of Christendom, would probably fall short. As a rule, most Christians don't want to practice the difficult and demanding faith that is Christianity. They don't seem to want to work that hard. Perhaps that is why so many young people like David are so disillusioned with the church. They hear, alongside the rest of us, readings like today's Gospel. They hear of the single-minded purpose of Jesus, and his unbending will toward those who would follow him. Then they look around the room at the modern followers of Jesus. These are not people who would give up the certainty of home for the risky business of following a wandering rabbi. These are not people who would walk away from aging parents in order to walk the difficult path to Jerusalem and the cross. These are not people who would abandon their plowing, be it in business or education, or some other task, in order to follow Jesus.

It would be easy to blame our society of convenience and leisure. But it appears that, even in years past, when people worked demanding hours at

demanding jobs, the idea that “being true disciples trumped all of that” was unpopular. It isn't that people, then or now, are lazy or faithless. It is just that we prefer the certain, and even the mundane, duty of family obligation more than the risky unknown ventures of faith.

This is the same kind of world Jesus confronted when he set his sights on Jerusalem. He encounters questions, if not rejection, at every turn. The Samaritans choose to honour an age-old blood feud with the Jews rather than become disciples. One man asks to fulfill his family obligations first. Another simply wishes to put his affairs in order and say goodbye. At least these latter two seem reasonable to us. But, Jesus' responses, seem strange, even harsh, in the face of these requests.

What Jesus seems to say is startling to people in his day as well as ours. "Follow me and you will no longer have permanent shelter." "Follow me and walk away from the safety and security of family ties." "Follow me and turn your back on your obligations to your parents."

Even those who are not looking for an easy, convenient faith are jarred by these words. What would happen to the preacher today who would seriously suggest such things to a congregation? Would we perhaps brand such a person a cult leader? What is Jesus suggesting here? How can we possibly comply? Is such radical extremism even desirable in today's world?

We need to keep a few things in mind. First, this passage comes on the heels of the Gospel's announcement that Jesus has set his mind on Jerusalem. Jesus is

telling us where HE is going, what HE has done and is doing. It is Jesus who chooses to wander without a permanent place in the world to lay his head. It is Jesus who has left his parents to be cared for by others in old age. It is Jesus who has left the lathe, hammer and saw of the workshop and not looked back.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem, and readers of Luke's Gospel know what is going to happen there. It has been foreshadowed by Jesus' own passion predictions. It was the point of discussion on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus understands clearly that he is going to die there. Those who approach him with the intent to follow him are being warned where he is going, and what fate awaits them. Jesus does not call his "followers" in order to send them down a different path.

Those who would follow Jesus are called to this same road. It is a difficult road. It is a journey, which, if we understand it clearly, is hard for the best of us to follow. It does require that we sacrifice everything, take up our crosses and follow Jesus to the grave. This has been and is the centre of the biblical call to follow Jesus from the very first and until today.

Part of the problem is that we have domesticated Christianity. We have changed the message. We have made it a religion that helps people avoid suffering and death. It has become, in the 1700+ years since it became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the religion of the powerful and the mighty, those who use it to exercise control over their subjects. It is no longer the religion of the dispossessed, the weak, those who, by following, risk their very lives. A religion of the powerful

finds it difficult to ask that power be given up.

The difficulty of Christianity in any culture is that it asks us to do that very thing. This is something that few of us can do, at least not on our own. But the Gospel narrative doesn't stop with Jesus' death. Nor, even, does it stop with resurrection. It doesn't stop with Jesus' ascension into heaven. It doesn't even stop on Pentecost day. As we read Luke's Gospel, we, like the first disciples are challenged to follow Jesus after we have been equipped to do so by Jesus himself.

His death equips us to follow. It shows us that God is so committed to our pain and abandonment that Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us, enters into that pain. We are forgiven, even our inability to commit to following Jesus' path. We are reconciled to God, not because we are able to live the "right" way, even Jesus' way, but rather because Jesus lives and dies our way.

Jesus' resurrection offers us hope beyond hope. We now see that death does not have the last word - that the world's final answer, the end of life, is but the start of God's new creation. This is not to say that we avoid death. Resurrection is hope and life through death, beyond death. It is a hope that offers Jesus' followers courage to embark on this most difficult path.

Pentecost Day reminds us that we are not alone. The disciples in ancient times received the gift of the Holy Spirit and then went out and did all of the things that Jesus called them to do. Luke's story of the ministry of the disciples in the book of Acts shows a church that grew by serving, not by being served. The disciples

became as single minded as Jesus, now not turning their faces toward Jerusalem, but rather by turning their faces away from it and toward the world.

God's mission focus has changed and our direction changes with it. We now follow him into a world desperately in need of the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. What sacrifices we might make cannot be anticipated at every turn of this journey, but we know that we are not alone. Jesus goes before us, and the Holy Spirit travels with us. Knowing this is what gives us the courage, the vision, and the faith to follow.

Such things are not found by observing the visible church. It is flawed and stumbles and makes mistakes along the way, as it has for two thousand years, and doubtless will continue to do. We could despair of the "easy" answers of a church trying its best to follow and falling short, just as we can despair of our own lives of faith, as we falter and fall short and require forgiveness again and again.

Or we can understand that when we focus on our missteps and those of others we miss the point entirely: that Jesus did not falter, but travelled down this path for us. The question is not whether we will follow the church that we can see, but whether we will follow the body of Christ that is so much larger than the church that we can see, that exists across time and space wherever people give and serve, even to the point of their own deaths and resurrections.

This universal church, beyond the institutional church, exists in and through real human institutions, just as Jesus also took on human flesh and blood. But it is

also so much more, just as Jesus was so much more than a mere rabbi.

"I can't show you the church that you are looking for," the pastor said to David in response to his question. "It isn't that it doesn't exist, but rather that it is hidden from the naked eye. It exists in spite of, and through, the church that has disillusioned you, which is what makes it all the harder to see. But it becomes possible to see it only through the eyes of love. It starts with God's love for us, undeserving though we might be.

When we learn to trust that love, to see ourselves the way God sees us, as beloved children, then we can see others that same way, including the church. God does not want to see us acting selfishly, using our power and position to hurt others, or imagine that by doing no harm we can avoid feeling guilt for the good we fail to do. But God also sees us beyond what we are. I invite you to do the same."

David took in the pastor's words for what they were worth. He is probably still working out how to reconcile what he sees and what lies deeper, what is and what will be. But then, so are we all. David and his pastor ended their time together with the following prayer which works whenever one sets out on any kind of journey, which for most of us is every morning, when we start our day.

*"O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."*