

## Season after Pentecost -Year C

June 30, 2019

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown, MD

Readings: Psalm 16, Luke 9:51-62

Grace and peace to you from God --- Father-Son-Holy Spirit. Amen

If you ever find yourself in a lively discussion about the authenticity of the gospels... if someone tries to tell you that Luke and the other writers just made it up to support their cause . . . point them to the portion of Luke's gospel that we just read. What keenly manipulative, persuasive gospel writer would include the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus the Christ saying *these* kinds of things to would-be followers? "I will follow you." "Come with me and have no guarantee of shelter or food." "I'll follow you, Jesus; just let me bury my father." "Let the dead bury their own dead." What? "I will follow you, Jesus, but let me first say good-bye to my family." "No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." These are not good quotes for a recruiting poster. Jesus sounds cold, heartless and downright offensive. If you were new to Jesus and heard this story, I do not think you would be inclined to want to know any more about him. So why did Luke include it? There must have been many things Jesus said or did over three years that did not make it in the gospels for one reason or another. Why include this memory that does not cast Jesus in a good light and might discourage followers?

Have you ever had someone ask you to do something that would only take a few minutes and it took hours? Did you ever have someone tell you that belonging to a certain organization or committee didn't involve much and you found yourself sucked deeply into projects that were immensely time and energy consuming? Did you have someone tell you something was easy but despite genuine effort and time, you just couldn't get how to play volleyball or the horn, sew, knit, cook or use your dang smart phone? None of us likes to be misled. No one likes the old bait and switch. We want accurate and truthful information before we make a commitment we intend to honor. I think this may be what is going on in today's gospel.

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem. Jesus has been trying to prepare his followers for what that will mean. Earlier in chapter nine of Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands." Do you know what happens right after Jesus tells them this? They begin to argue over which one of them was the greatest. "Jesus is [being] perfectly clear: he is saying that his obedience to the Father--setting his face toward Jerusalem--will cost him his life."<sup>1</sup> Proclaiming the love of God for all people. Teaching that no one is a nobody to God. Telling us the poor, the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, the sick, the rejected are to be cared for by all of us. Saying that there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for

another. All of these messages that Jesus not only said but lived will cost him his life, because the self-centered world as it is, the culture that loves itself, and the status quo obsessed with power will not tolerate any challenge or change. His followers — including us — will face the same opposing forces. Obeying God ---- choosing to love all, oppose injustice, stand up for those others despised, refuse to compromise God's commands ---- will likely put you in harm's way, if not always than occasionally.

In other words, following Jesus is not easy. Following Jesus faithfully, day in and day out, in big and small ways, in how we treat those we know, and in what we support or allow for those we do not know — this love and obedience to God is to encompass our entire lives and it can be difficult. Faithfulness to Jesus is not just Sunday mornings, occasional good deed or being a nice person ---- it is a way of life, a lifestyle in which all aspects of our lives are dedicated to honoring, praising, serving God and our neighbor.

So Jesus is not being mean or cruel. Jesus is trying to be honest and prepare his disciples. He is trying to be clear about what it will mean to truly, seriously, consciously follow him. Throughout the gospel Jesus invites, implores, wants us to join him as partners with God so that God's kingdom comes, "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That was his mission. It is the mission of those who choose to follow him. Also, did you hear an urgency in Jesus' words? "Jesus Christ calls you and me to follow him now. Not tomorrow. Not the next day, but right now. Not when you get everything in order. Not when life is a little more certain or less chaotic. No, Jesus Christ calls you and me now and is ready to send us to be his witnesses today. To forgive now. To love now. To serve now. To do justice now. To tell the truth now. To work for peace now and reconciliation now. To sacrifice now. To put others first now. To live for God now. To be a Christian now. The call to follow Jesus is a call to follow right now."<sup>2</sup>

The call to follow Jesus is urgent and costly. And, discipleship requires dogged determination, hands on the plow and no looking back. I found Pastor Stacy Sauls had a good insight about this. He writes that his grandfather and grandmother were married to each other for just about 70 years. Sauls recalls one day,

"My grandmother . . . sat me down to teach me what that was all about. She used a decoration in their living room to deliver the message. It was a glass knick-knack, a statuette, I think, but I don't remember now what it was supposed to be. What I do remember is that it had a light and the light rotated. As the light rotated, the glass glowed with different colors. Marriage is like that, she explained. Sometimes it is bright and happy. Sometimes it is darker and not so happy. Her message was all about keeping one's eyes on the goal and getting

through the bad times together just as much as the good times . . . It was a gentler version of the plowing metaphor, but it was the same point. Nothing that matters is accomplished without effort. Nothing that matters is accomplished without determination. Nothing that matters is accomplished without keeping one's eyes determinedly on the goal.”<sup>3</sup>

This is a lesson that goes far beyond marriage and applies to anything that really matters, anything that is related to the kingdom of God, anything that is about life and living life to the very fullest of what it has to offer”<sup>4</sup> takes effort and determination.

I stopped writing this sermon at this point and walked away several times. How do I end it? Discipleship is costly, urgent and requires effort and determination. Most don't find that attractive or encouraging. Come follow Jesus NOW — it will cost you comfort and touch on every part of your life. There's no standing on the sidelines or retirement. Put aside attracting others, most *followers* of Jesus in churches today would find this message of Jesus unsettling or offensive. “What do you mean loving God, coming to church, tithing, following the rules, reading my Bible, saying my prayers and helping when I can isn't enough?” Do you understand why I was stuck? It is the reason why it must have been so tempting for St. Luke to leave it out of his gospel. Who wants people to be scared away, guilted or angry with you?

Yet, Jesus *did* tell disciples that following him and obeying God the Father, like he did, was urgent, costly and asked for consistent, conscious effort and determination. Can I say anything different? Do I dare soften it so I, so we can swallow it more easily? Costly, urgent and determined commitment. It is God's truth and it is hard. AND it is the path to life abundant . . . it is the way of lives that brings God's redeeming love to a hurting world . . . it bring hope, forgiveness and healing . . . it will lead to a peace within us that can stand up to hard times, illness and loss. It is the way of life for which we were born and baptized. AND that same God ---- who loves us perfectly, unconditionally, eternally will love us perfectly, unconditionally, eternally when we succeed and when we fail.

So what do we do about this costly discipleship of ours that needs determination and urgency? We rely on the grace of God, pull up our big girl and big boy panties and live into it with all the love of God we can muster . . . day in and day out . . . again and again . . . starting each day asking God, “Show me and help me to see what it is I can do for you and my neighbor today” and mean it. And may the peace that passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” Amen. Linda M Alessandri 6/28/19

ENDNOTES

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1. Tony Sundermeier, "Urgency and Focus" June 26, 2016 as posted on day1.org
  2. Tony Sundermeier, "Urgency and Focus" June 26, 2016 as posted on day1.org
  3. Stacy Sauls, "The Cranky Jesus," June 30, 2013 as posted on day1.org
  4. Stacy Sauls, "The Cranky Jesus," June 30, 2013 as posted on day1.org