



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JUNE 30, 2019
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Following Jesus Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Jesus' ministry began with a simple invitation to those who would be his disciples: "Follow me."

Whenever we read those stories of Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John, Philip and Nathaniel, and Matthew, we are astounded because it appears that Jesus walked by them, said, "Follow me.", and they did! It all seems so simple and natural. After all, if Jesus walked up to you and said, "Follow me.", wouldn't you? At least that is our approach to Christian faith: tell the story of Jesus, invite people to follow, and they will.

Jesus, however, knew full well that for most of us, following him is not so simple. Luke tells us about four incidents when the assumptions about following Jesus were wrong.

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Luke 9:51-62

Jesus frequently encountered Samaritans in his travels, and usually those experiences went well. Luke reminds us, however, that there were serious differences in the social and religious perspectives of Jews and Samaritans who were related but generally did not like one another at all. On this occasion, Jesus had “set his face toward Jerusalem.” In other words, he was on his way to the cross and nothing would deter him. Along the way they came to a Samaritan village. The Samaritans would not receive Jesus because he was headed to Jerusalem. The Samaritans would not accept that God had to be worshiped in Jerusalem alone. They worshiped God on Mount Gerizim because they believed Moses had decreed that is where they should worship. Jesus does not seem to be flustered or out of sorts, but his disciples are. In a moment of righteous indignation, they ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” as if they had super powers of their own! Instead of a wink and a smile, Jesus rebuked them, first for assuming that they could call down fire from heaven and, second, because destroying people who do not share your perspective on the world is not what following him is about. With tails tucked between their legs, they followed him to another village where, presumably, they received a more congenial welcome.

On another occasion, someone popped up and said to Jesus, “I will follow you!” I imagine Jesus looked at that young man, tidy and well-fed because his mother took care of him, and realized how naive he was. “I don’t have any place to call home,” he responded. “Before you sign up, count the cost of following me.”

Then Jesus turned to someone who looked a bit more in touch with the world and invited him to follow. “I’ll have to bury my father first,” the man replied. Understanding his dilemma because he felt responsible to care for his father as long as he lived, Jesus told the young man, “Then proclaim the kingdom of God.” In other words, live every day as if God is in the midst of your life—because God is!”

Perhaps overhearing all of this conversation, another fellow piped up and said, “I will follow you, Lord, but first I have to say goodbye to the folks at home.” Realizing that he would never see the man again, Jesus reminded him that a good plow hand keeps his eyes focused ahead and does not look back. Family ties are important, but we have to decide if we will maintain the status quo or if we will follow Jesus into that unknown land ahead.

Following Jesus, no matter how easy we make it sound, is not something that we generally choose to do on the spur of the moment.

Following Jesus is something to think about, to consider from all angles, and to do with complete dedication.

In Sunday School a few weeks ago, we talked about this matter of following Jesus and how it impacts the decisions we make with regard to living our faith day by day. Members of the class were well aware that discipleship is often complicated and they shared some of their struggles with following Jesus.

One person talked about how he sometimes feels pulled in different directions by his heart and his head. Sometimes, he said, our heart might lead us in one direction but our head goes a different way. How can we integrate the two? We talked about the dilemma faced daily by some Christians who live on our southern border. Knowing that it is against the law to aid someone who illegally crosses into the U.S., they also know that hundreds of people die of dehydration in the desert. Their mind tells them not to break the law but their heart tells them it is not right to let someone die in their backyard. What should they do? How do they follow Jesus each day?

Another person spoke about the challenges of running a business according to smart fiscal principles and acting in accordance with what his faith teaches him to do. Sometimes, he said, he feels like he has to compromise either his business practices or his faith to keep the business running day by day. On some days, he faces having to compromise both fiscal responsibility and faith to meet the demands of business. How do you follow Jesus and operate a business in a Christlike way?

Someone else reminded us that often our faith leads us to do something that is clearly the right thing to do—like welcoming refugees into our country. Yet, with that response of faith also comes a responsibility to provide whatever is needed by doing what faith compels us to do—like caring for refugees we allow into our country. How do we responsibly follow Jesus when sometimes the cost and commitment can be quite overwhelming?

How do we reconcile these tensions in our lives? How do we follow Jesus and live responsibly in the world? I will follow you, Lord, but first I have some other things to do! I will follow you, Lord, but only so far as I am reasonably comfortable. I will follow you, Lord, but only when I can do the other things I want to do. I will follow you, Lord, but only on my terms. Following Jesus may not be as easy as it seems.

The Apostle Paul knew firsthand the high cost of discipleship. His story began with an enraged desire to exterminate all followers of Christ. When his eyes were fully opened to the truth of who Jesus was, he wholeheartedly committed to follow Jesus. He may not have fully counted the cost, but he knew his life would not be easy and uncomplicated. Following Jesus resulted in constant challenges by people who were rightfully suspicious of his sudden change of heart. His theology was called into question by the original followers of Jesus who thought that a Gentile had to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. He was under constant scrutiny by observant Jews who criticized his lax approach to Jewish law. He was hounded by Roman authorities, beaten, jailed, mocked, and abused. Paul knew firsthand that following Jesus is not as simple as saying, "I will follow you." When the Christians in Galatia struggle to understand what is involved in following Jesus, Paul was ready to share his perspective.

First of all, he said, recognize that above all, you have been given freedom in Christ, so do not enslave yourselves any more by law or human devises. You are free, he said, but you cannot use that freedom to enslave one another. If you want to summarize all of the law of our ancestors, it is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Treat one another in the way you would like to be treated and you will get along fine. God will be honored and Christ will be praised!

Paul understood all of the dilemmas that we face, only he did not describe them as struggles between heart and head or faith and business or compassion and responsibility. He talked about a struggle between the Spirit and the flesh, but he was talking about the same things.

He offered a list of things that he suggested are "of the flesh." The first things he mentioned are easy for us to agree we should avoid: "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, and sorcery." We can easily see how such activities are in opposition to following Jesus. Then Paul began to meddle when he also mentioned things that we are much more likely to be our struggles: "enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." It was a "gotcha" moment because, just like the Galatian Christians, we Rocky Mount Christians deal in these works of the flesh all the time. In fact, every day we talk about how our community and nation and world are more infected with enmity, strife, anger, quarreling, and things like these than ever before. How do we follow Jesus when we live in such a divided and tense time?

Paul's suggestion is rather simplistic, though not simple. He recommends that we take a bite of the fruit of the Spirit and see how it tastes. The fruit of the Spirit, Paul says, is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Imagine what would happen if we served that menu every time we got together with people we do not like and with whom we do not agree! Imagine if we began talking about our nation's problems and sought solutions that would bring love, joy, and peace to us all! What if we intentionally called on patience, kindness, and generosity as we discussed ways to make our community a healthier, safer, more prosperous place to live? How different would our relationships be if we treated one another with faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Paul was not at all naive. He knew the cost of discipleship. He knew, perhaps better than anyone, what following Jesus really means. He understood the competing desires, the tugs between heart and head, the conflicts between compassion and responsibility. He also knew that God in Christ has given us the gift of the Spirit who offers us these wonderful resources to use day by day: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

When we were at the beach last week, our son Robert proudly wore his latest Clemson t-shirt celebrating their recent National Football Championship. That designation was certainly on the shirt, but boldly emblazoned on the front was the simple phrase which guided the coaches, team, and fans to that achievement: "ALL IN." All in! Certainly a national championship in any sport requires that every person involved is "all in." I think when Jesus was talking to people about following him, that was what he was trying to say. You have to be "all in." You may not have a place to sleep. You may have to let nature take its course without you back home. You may have to let go of things that are dear to you now. You may have to set aside your assumptions, prejudices, proclivities, desires, and even politics to follow Jesus. Paul understood that when you are "all in" with Jesus, you have to push out those negative inclinations of the flesh like fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and such. In their place, you follow that one principle which Jesus affirmed: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Are you "all in"? When Jesus invites you to follow him, what will you say? More important, what will you do?

June 30, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Long ago, your prophet announced that “the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isaiah 9). So it has also been with us, O God. Today we pray that you would open our eyes to the light of your love offered us in Jesus Christ. Enable us to see all of the wonder and beauty you have given to us. And help us to see the many ways that we can bring light to the people around us.

We thank you for all of the goodness that has come our way. Each day is filled with the marvels of your world. We are surrounded with reminders of your creativity and love. Let us not miss all of the goodness before us when it seems that struggle and strife are all that we see.

We know, O God, that you provide everything that we need for a full and complete life. We are grateful for good healthcare when we are ill, for comfort when we grieve, for companionship when we are alone, and for hope when we despair. Make us aware of resources that you place before us and remind us that you also use us to be a source of hope and healing for other people.

During this week when we celebrate the founding of our great nation, keep us mindful of the reasons our ancestors came to this fruitful land. When we rejoice in freedom, let us be sure that all people are free. When we celebrate the opportunities that are ours, let us make certain that those same opportunities are available to all people. When we feel safe and secure, let us do all that is possible to offer safety and security to everyone. When we proclaim that you are our God, remind us that all people are your children as well.

We do thank you for our nation and community and ask for your blessing and help. We pray for our world, O God, and seek ways toward peace and prosperity for all people. We pray for ourselves and ask that you provide what we need so that we might be exactly what other people need; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.