

“Don’t Look Back!”

Luke 9:57-62; Philippians 3:12-16

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May 2, 2021

I’ve spent many years trying to avoid these particular verses from Luke and I have no doubt that they were just as difficult and disturbing for his DISCIPLES to hear as it was for ME to write this sermon. The account actually begins a few verses earlier, in v.51 where we are told that he, Jesus, had “set his face toward Jerusalem.” Now there is MORE involved in this phrase “he set his face” than the decision to go to the City of David. It implies fixedness of purpose, ESPECIALLY in the face of difficulty or danger. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem ONLY ONCE and that is for his Passion. It is a journey which will include humiliation, suffering, and even death. His entire life was ONE CONTINUOUS JOURNEY whose goal was “to get to Jerusalem” and he goes for the SOLE purpose of DYING there. Thus, in spite of all the difficulties and all the dangers that lay before him, if he was going to fulfill his Father’s will, he had to “set his face” and allow NOTHING to deter him.

This brings us to our gospel lesson for this morning. We’re told that a man approached Jesus with the desire to become one of his followers. He says, “Jesus, I want to be your disciple and I will leave everything and follow you.” Jesus responds by telling the man, “You don’t understand what you are asking. For foxes have holes and birds have nests, but I have nowhere to lay my head at night.” If Jesus was wanting to grow his church and bring new members into it as EVERY church does, then all I can say is he BLEW it. He says everything you would NEVER say to someone contemplating joining your congregation- and this to a man who didn’t even have to be persuaded but WANTED to join of his own volition. Yet, here is Jesus telling him, “Buddy, before you get serious about following me, you had better count the cost; you had better make sure what it is you’re getting yourself into because it’s going to demand EVERYTHING from you, including your LIFE! Otherwise, I don’t want you.” Earlier in the same chapter, he had told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.” What more chilling words could Jesus have given to any prospective disciple than THAT- saying that as he had set his face to go to Jerusalem where he was going to die, so must WE set our OWN face to Jerusalem and for the purpose of dying WITH HIM. If we’re not willing to do that, then we had better find someone ELSE to follow!

To a SECOND person, it is JESUS who extends the invitation. Apparently he feels this man would be a welcome addition to his ministry. However, he informs Jesus that before he can join him and the rest of his disciples, he would first have to return home and bury his deceased father, a task which under the Mosaic Law had to be performed within 24 hours of the person’s death. But rather than being understanding and saying, “Well of COURSE! As a good Jew you NEED to return home and bury your father,” he says “Let those who are dead bury the dead,” asserting that the kingdom of God is much more important than his feelings of personal grief, and unless he was willing to acknowledge that, he was of no use to either him OR to his Father in heaven.

I found MYSELF in a SIMILAR position fifteen years ago while pastoring in Iowa. One morning, I received a phone call from the administrator of the nursing home in New Jersey my mother resided in. My mom had severe Alzheimer's and hadn't known anyone for several years so I found it a relief to hear that she had developed pneumonia and died sometime during the night. However, that call could not have come at a more INOPPORTUNE moment for that SAME evening, we were all set to kick-off our week-long Vacation Bible School. As the executor of her small estate, I found myself in a position similar to this young man by having to make preparations to fly back home and fulfill her funeral arrangements. If Jesus had said to ME, "David, let the dead bury the dead. Your responsibility as the leader of VBS must take precedent over managing your mother's funeral," I would have objected just as I assume this SECOND man did and replied, "Jesus, take a hike! You're being unreasonable and you had better find yourself ANOTHER disciple because THIS has to be my priority at this very moment. If you can't understand a responsibility as basic and necessary as THIS, then I'd have to presume you're the WRONG leader for me." Well can you now understand why I've spent so many years filled with consternation over this text! Of course, I immediately contacted my Christian Ed director and explained the situation to her which, unlike JESUS, she COMPLETELY understood. I subsequently flew home to New Jersey to be with my family for the week, thereby missing an event I had spent months helping to plan and which, DESPITE my absence, was a great success.

Now if you're SHOCKED that Jesus' demands must take precedence over your most basic familial obligations, then consider how a few chapters later in Luke, he tells his followers, "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own LIFE, he cannot be my disciple." Of course, Jesus is using hyperbole here to emphasize that our allegiance to him must even be GREATER than our love for our family, our friends, and even for OURSELVES, that such are the demands and requirements of his Father's kingdom should we decide to enlist with him. This ought to underscore the SERIOUSNESS of any decision to follow Christ or join his church, how it may actually become the most IMPORTANT and CONSEQUENTIAL decision you or I ever make.

Finally, a third person approached our Lord and said, "Jesus, I would love to be your disciple, but I first must say goodbye to my family. I love my family and were I to leave without first explaining to them where I'm going and why, they would think that I abandoned them or perhaps might have been kidnapped or something." Again, such a reasonable request could HARDLY be refused- and yet Jesus DOES. He responds by telling him, "Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." You can't plow a straight line if you are constantly looking back. To plow a straight line, you have to keep your eyes and thus your focus out front. In other words, nothing more keeps us from the goal of becoming a mature Christian than the tendency to constantly look back in our lives- the inability to put behind us the failures and disappointments of our past. Yes, those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it but we can remember earlier events without allowing the pain of guilt and regret that often comes with such memories to tear us up and destroy us. If we have done something wrong, we can recognize it, repent of it, ask God to forgive us, and then be thankful for the pardon we have received through Christ's offer of grace. We must learn to let go of everything that may hinder us and that includes old grudges, ancient hurts, and past failures which keep us from looking forward and moving into the future where GOD is.

Throughout Jesus' travels and in all his teachings, he laid down just one requirement to become part of his vanguard--only ONE--and that was for them to FOLLOW HIM. Jesus did not look for conformity among his followers. He did not demand that everyone think the same way, speak the same message, or act alike- only that there be a willingness to leave their homes, to drop their nets, to abandon their plows, and then follow him wherever he might lead them. He never gave them a Sunday School exam; he never investigated their private lives; he never asked for a character reference; he never conducted an inquisition to weed out the faithful from the faithless, the disingenuous from the sincere, the orthodox from the heretic. He simply said "follow me" and that was all. Christ seemed to be saying, "Though you might not completely understand my words and my teachings, though my purpose and mission might remain obscure to you now, though my arrest and death may leave you confused and afraid, though there are times you may be so fearful for your own safety and security that you deny me and forsake me, CONTINUE to follow me- IN SPITE of all your questions, IN SPITE of all your doubts, IN SPITE of your frequent denials and moral failures. Just FOLLOW ME and one day, you WILL understand. I PROMISE you that."

The Apostle Paul stated the SAME theme in a number of his writings employing the metaphor of a race, how unless we stay focused and keep our "eyes on the prize," we may be in danger of not even FINISHING the race much less EARNING some kind of medal for all our efforts. He wrote in his letter to the church at Philippi:

*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

The point Paul makes here is that life is like a magnificent foot race; it is a grueling marathon that needs to be run with every bit of our intelligence and skill and patience. There are no short-cuts allowed, no spiritual steroids to give someone any kind of an advantage. As the Olympic athletes trained for their race, so must WE as the people of God train for OURS; as they exercised their bodies, so must WE exercise our souls. In other words, we need a renewed intensity, a renewed commitment, a renewed love if we're ever going to complete the race set before us. The race course, LIKE LIFE ITSELF, is filled with many peaks and valleys and treacherous turns which if we're not prepared for, we'll soon be overwhelmed by its difficulties and challenges and find ourselves crippled by the side of the road instead.

Of course, many of us don't like to think of life as a race. Races are far too demanding, far too brutal. When I was in seminary, my roommate George was an accomplished tri-athlete, that is, he participated in competitions that involved running, swimming, and cycling- all three. I've never known anyone in my life with a greater sense of self-discipline and commitment to becoming the best he could be. His dedication eventually inspired me to take up jogging because I wanted to develop that same kind of self-discipline in my OWN life. Thus, in the morning when he'd leave for his run, I'd take off after him, furiously trying to keep up. By the time we'd gone a couple of blocks, I'd ALREADY be huffing and puffing and convinced I was about to DIE. After a week of this self-abuse, I simply gave up because it was just too much work- you see, I didn't want to pay the price.

The fact is that to be a runner means to be competitive, that you have to be in constant training for the event. As any Olympian knows, months and years must be spent well in advance

of the meet, straining every nerve in preparation. Every muscle must be strengthened and hardened; physical and mental stamina must be developed through constant exertion. The entranceway to the historic Oakmont Country Club, where more U.S. Open golf championships have been held than on any other course, is only a stone's throw from the front-door of my house. Every time I drive past those gates, I can't help but think what a charmed life those golfers have, how they make big bucks simply hitting that little white ball around, enjoying beautiful scenery and the adoring gazes of the crowds. I become even MORE than a little envious especially in light of my OWN often terrible and inconsistent play. But what I DON'T want to think about are the hours upon hours each of those athletes (and athletes they are) has spent to get to where he (or she) is, that unless he is willing to put in the time and energy that being a professional golfer demands, he wouldn't get anywhere CLOSE to the level he must play to stay competitive. They are reaping the rewards of YEARS of hard work and financial sacrifice that few of us have EVER had to put in.

I think most of us would much prefer to think of life more like a PLAYGROUND than a RACE COURSE, as a CASINO to have fun in rather than an ARENA to prove oneself. At heart, most of us, Christian and non-Christian, are hedonists- lovers of pleasure and ease than we are lovers of purpose and discipline and fortitude. Christ and the church then become just another option in our lives, something to participate in if the spirit moves us- which it DOESN'T very often. Too frequently, we look to Christ, not for guidance or continued strength but for the quick fix, for instant answers to life's problems. It seems that it's only when our backs are against the wall, when we find ourselves overwhelmed by trouble or tragedy of one sort or another that we then call out and implore his help. Otherwise, we'd have no purpose for him. Similarly, we look to his church, not to pay our vows before God, not to become enjoined to a community of faith where we might grow together and discover the meaning of such words as "grace" and "love." Rather, we go to church on Sunday mornings seeking to be entertained. If the service is too long or the sermon too boring, we decide to go somewhere else the following Sunday, that is, until we find one that fits our mood and suits our purposes. We attend such churches wondering what it is WE CAN GET OUT OF IT rather than what it is WE CAN GIVE to God and each other. There is no radical discipleship in our lives nor is there much devotion or commitment in our service- only a need to fill our boring lives with the latest sort of diversion or pleasure.

It is with fortitude and perseverance that we must run the race set before us if we are to eventually cross that finish line. However, if we concentrate on Christ--he who goes before us-- he will provide us with all the guidance and direction we need to find our way and achieve our goal. And should we falter, should we struggle and fall down under the weariness and weight of the strain, he promises to help us onto his OWN shoulder so that we finish the race with him.

In a couple of months' time, the Summer Olympics will get underway in Tokyo, Japan. I love the Olympics and have been an avid watcher for years- both summer AND winter games. However, I do have one specific Olympic memory I'll never forget. During the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona, Spain, Derek Redmond of Great Britain posted the fastest time of the first round of the 400-meter race and then handily won his quarter-final. In the semi-final, Redmond started well, but 175 meters from the finish line, his hamstring tore. Redmond immediately fell to the ground in extreme pain, tears coursing down his cheeks. As stretcher bearers made their way over to him, he knew he had to finish the race. With great difficulty, he managed to slowly rise to his feet and hobble along the track- his face etched with just the most

terrible disappointment. It was then a figure jumped out of the stands and ran onto the track to be at his side. It was his father--Jim Redmond--who had supported Derek for his entire career. Using his own shoulder as a crutch, he helped him take one step after another as together, they slowly made their way towards that finish line. Shortly before reaching it, Jim let Derek go to complete the race by himself while the entire crowd of 65,000 gave him a standing ovation. As I sat there in front of my television set observing one of the greatest acts of heroism and love I had ever witnessed in a sporting event, tears streamed down my face even as they did down the face of almost every person in that stadium that afternoon. Well this is what Jesus is prepared to do for US- to run out of the stands and place his shoulder beneath our OWN arms to serve as OUR crutch, to act as OUR helper, to become OUR support whenever WE falter- and falter WE WILL, not once but MANY TIMES throughout the course of our lives!

Now in closing, I have a confession to make. I had originally intended to conclude my sermon the same way so many preachers end their sermons on this text- by looking you straight in the eye and challenging you with this probing question: “Do you LOVE Jesus Christ?” that is, “Do you TRULY love him? Do you love him with every fiber of your being? Do you love him with every ounce of your mind and heart, your spirit and your soul? Do you love him enough to forsake all and follow him WHEREVER and WHENEVER he asks you to, for WITHOUT such a commitment to his person, you will never be able to follow him REGARDLESS of how much time and money and commitment you serve his church with.”

The truth is that I have been in those churches and I’ve listened to those sermons and even had my OWN faith challenged by such appeals from the preacher. However, rather than leaving that sanctuary with greater love for Christ and his Church, I found myself burdened with GREATER GUILT and DEEPENING SHAME as a result. You see, if you’re truly honest with yourself, then, you’ll have to admit that the answer is NO, that you DON’T really love Jesus to that degree and in the manner we are required to. And I KNOW this because I know my OWN heart and I don’t have that same love EITHER. Truth be told, there is NOTHING PURE about my love for God- it is tinged with every kind of lust and pride and selfishness there is- sins that are on clear display every minute of every day. However, I have since discovered that it is NOT OUR faith in Christ and OUR love for him that matters MOST but rather it is Christ’s unending FAITH in US and his LOVE for US that saves us and inspires us to follow him to the end. His INCOMPARABLE LOVE ALONE enables us to keep our purpose fixed, keep our resolve sure, and what enables our faith to become stronger and bolder in the process.

Therefore, I’m going to end this morning’s sermon, not by challenging your faith commitment with some kind of phony question like, “How much do you REALLY love Jesus? Do you love him enough to follow him whenever and wherever he calls you, REGARDLESS of the cost, even if it means dying on a cross just like HIM?” Rather, I challenge you with an altogether DIFFERENT question: “At this very minute, do you understand the depth and breadth and height of Jesus’s love for you? Are you aware that he accepts you and will never abandon you in spite of how miserable a life you’ve led and the number of innocent persons you’ve hurt in the process? Do you not realize that he cares for you SO MUCH that he FORGIVES you, not once, not twice, not even seven times but SEVEN TIMES SEVENTY in spite of how often we may have broken faith with him and others?” The fact is that our relationship to Christ has never depended upon the AMOUNT of our faith or the QUALITY of our love which, believe me, is FAR LESS than any of us would like to admit; in fact, we fool ourselves if we think our faith and our love for him actually amounts to ANYTHING. Rather, that relationship is totally the

result of HIS unlimited love and HIS unconditional regard FOR US and nothing else. He loves us with every fiber of his being, loves us with every ounce of his mind and heart and spirit and soul. And if THAT doesn't instill within us the faith and courage to forsake all and follow him when he asks us to, then NOTHING will. For WITHOUT such a radical love and commitment on his part towards US, we would NEVER be able to follow him REGARDLESS of how much time and money and commitment and service we think we put into his kingdom. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, help us to love you and to love your voice unreservedly. Help us to recognize it amid the many distractions and counterfeits that so often pass for you, and then once hearing it, give us the faith and the courage to obey it wherever it might lead us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*