

Texts: 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Ps 16; Gal 5:1, 13-25; Lk 9:51-62

THEME: Discipleship – the uncompromising demands that Jesus places on would-be followers

Introduction

Question: What's your favorite excuse for not doing something? (*Wait for responses from the congregation*). In today's gospel, Jesus encounters three would-be disciples.

Context of today's Gospel - Luke 9:51-62

Jesus knows his earthly ministry is moving to a close. The Transfiguration up on the mountain has happened earlier in this chapter of Luke's gospel. Jesus has been seen by a few disciples transfigured in glory. He has been seen talking with Moses and Elijah, and they talk about his coming departure, which will occur in Jerusalem – it's an illusion to Jesus' execution and death. The story ends with a voice coming from a cloud saying, "*This is my Son, my Chosen, listen to him!*" Jesus knows his time on earth is coming to close.

In today's text, we are told that He now "*sets his face to Jerusalem.*" This doesn't mean that Jesus decides to take a side trip to Jerusalem as if he is taking a vacation. No. The words imply an unswerving intensity, a destiny-oriented resolve to go to Jerusalem. And so Jesus commences the journey.

While on the way, he enters a village in Samaria, looking for hospitality. The villagers forthrightly reject him. It's similar to his rejection in Nazareth following his baptism. Two of his disciples, James and John, want to call down fire from heaven to consume the village, something reminiscent of an incident in the Old Testament, in which the prophet Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies. Jesus will have none of it. He confronts their hurt pride and basically says he expects more from them. In fact, he expects them to follow his earlier command to simply "shake off the dust from their feet" and leave any village that would not welcome them.

As they go on their way they come across three potential followers. At last, we see people who welcome Jesus, who respond positively to Jesus, and who want to follow him. At least, they all indicate they want to follow him, but surprisingly, it appears Jesus turns them down!

The Three Disciple Candidates

The first candidate enthusiastically volunteers: "*I will follow you wherever you go.*" If someone responds to an altar call and says, "I want to follow Jesus," our usual response is, "That's great; welcome." But what is Jesus response to this would-be disciple? Basically he says, "*We're not staying at the Mariott; I'm totally dependent on the hospitality of others. If you follow me you're likely to become homeless; are you willing to do that?*"

Yesterday there was a confirmation service at the National Cathedral. We had three adults from St. James' saying, "I want to follow Jesus" as they renewed their Baptismal Covenant. I heard the word, "Congratulations" a lot after the service. I don't think anyone said, "If you follow Jesus, you know you might become homeless." I'd like to think that I would follow Jesus even if it meant no roof over my head, but that's a tough one. Would I? Would you?

Jesus actually initiates and issues a summons to the second candidate: "*Follow me,*" Jesus says. This person says, "*First, let me go make arrangements for my father's funeral.*" I suspect all of us

would like to hear Jesus say, *“Not a problem, I understand. I’ll wait for you.”* But Jesus refuses. Jesus recognizes that the man has placed conditions on his willingness to follow. So Jesus responds: *“Let the dead bury the dead.”* Loyalty to Jesus takes precedence even over family obligations. I wonder how often we tell God we’ll get back to following him as soon as we take care of a few other responsibilities.

The third potential disciple says: *“I’m ready to follow you, Lord, but first I need to get a few things straightened out at home.”* This person simply wants to bid farewell to his family at home. Jesus seems to say: “I expect more from you than Elijah asked of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19-21); *No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*

I think it’s always hard for us to hear that Jesus expects to be more important to us than family. But the radical nature of Jesus’ words comes as he claims priority over not the worst of human relationships, but the best. Jesus never says to choose him over the devil but to choose him even over the family.

I admit I would like this passage from Luke’s gospel a lot more if Jesus’ response to these three prospective disciples had been, *“Wonderful! Glad to hear it.”* This is a hard story for most of us, because we too have said we want to follow Jesus. And just as with these three, we find ourselves confronted with the truth that we’re probably not as committed as we would like to believe. I suspect we try not to think about the ways we don’t follow.

Luke doesn’t tell us what any of the three potential disciples in this story decide to do. So we are left to wonder about them, and while doing so, wonder about ourselves. You see, we are now being given the opportunity to “finish the story.” We are called to imagine what it might mean to devote ourselves to Jesus and His kingdom with reckless abandon, with the same **resolve** Jesus exhibited in setting his face to go to Jerusalem, with the same single-mindedness to live out our respective calls as followers of Jesus Christ undeterred by the challenges and temptations of life.

As we read Luke’s gospel, the actual contours of what it means to follow Jesus is different from one person to another. It was one thing for Mary and Martha; something different for Zacchaeus; and different again for James and John. But each heard Jesus’ summons and dared to imagine a life in which the experience of God’s blessings undid and remolded every other concern and commitment. And having imagined such a life, they then got up and stumbled along after Jesus on his way to Jerusalem.

Conclusion

Jesus continues to summon disciples and followers today. It’s a call to open our hands, rather than grasp tightly to either family or possessions. It’s a practice the saints and mystics call “detachment.” The remarkable thing is that those who so detach are freed from the need to possess family or material goods, or anything else; and, in being so freed, enjoy to distance necessary to truly love family and to experience life to its fullest.

And so we return to the question with which we began: What’s your favorite excuse for not doing something? And the comes the next: “What does Jesus want of me?” These are questions to ponder as we consider our own response to Jesus’ call to follow him.