

Pentecost 3C Proper 8 - June 30, 2019

"Guided by Luke: The Cost of Commitment" - Rev. Seth D Jones ©

Scripture: Luke 9:51-62

Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem (vs 51). He decides to head toward Jerusalem through Samaria. Samaria is worse than another religion; it is an aberration, a deformed version of Judaism, according to the Jews of Jerusalem. Why would Jesus decide to go through here to head to Jerusalem?

The Samaritans won't let Jesus and the disciples stay in their village. Perhaps they are afraid of the Roman authorities, having heard about Jesus and his behavior in other places. Perhaps they see Jesus and the disciples as traditional Jews and refuse hospitality because a traditional Jew would refuse the same hospitality with the Samaritans. We don't know.

What we do know is that the disciples are angry on Jesus' behalf. They ask Jesus if he wants them to call fire down on the Samaritan village. (vs 54).

I think it's interesting the disciples think they are capable of calling down destruction upon a village from God above, based on their teaching from Jesus. It is a weird interpretation of the whole love your neighbor thing, isn't it?

Jesus rebukes them for their desire to destroy and kill.

I am sure the disciples were confused by Jesus' rebuke. The disciples seem to have misunderstood what they committed to when they chose to follow Jesus.

What are we committing to when we follow Jesus?

Well, just based on this little story right here, one thing we are ***not*** committing to is making sure everyone else follows and welcomes Jesus. That is a surprising outcome, isn't it? Isn't that what we have been led to believe we are supposed to do, right? Bring the world to Christ?

That's what the disciples think they're doing in Samaria - getting everyone to welcome and follow Jesus, and if Jesus isn't welcomed, then we'll bring down fire from heaven to destroy you.

So what are the disciples, what are we, committing to, then? I think the answer has something to do with committing to the person of Jesus and it also has something to do

with hospitality. We are not only supposed to be a welcoming presence to others in the name of Christ, but there is another side to hospitality we don't like to think about. It is that other side of hospitality for which Jesus rebukes the disciples. How do we, as a follower of Jesus, make ourselves welcomed by others? Hospitality is as much about creating a space for *the other* as it is about finding out how we can be *welcomed by the other*.

By saying Jesus is turning his face toward Jerusalem, Luke is showing us that the whole world is being turned upside down. Our understandings about what it means to be a God-follower and a people of hospitality, which has been a cultural code in the Middle East for millennia, shifts radically when we follow the Son of God. What it means to be welcomed may be an even more important question than how to be welcoming.

THE DIFFERENT ATTEMPTS TO FOLLOW JESUS

For us, as followers of Jesus, these questions and shifts in thinking are as important today as they were 2000 years ago. Jesus cuts through all our localized ideas of hospitality. In order to be welcomed and to be welcoming, designations disappear. There are no longer Samaritans or Jews, no longer male or female, slave or free, gay or straight, black or white, people 'from away' or people of heritage, there aren't even followers of Christ or non-believers. Who shall we welcome and how shall we make ourselves prepared to be welcomed when the labels don't apply anymore? Our story this morning suggests the answer is all in how we follow Jesus.

We use all these labels and ways of thinking and more to find reasons not to follow Jesus. We find all kinds of ways of not committing to Christ, and the reason is because we know there are costs to following Jesus.

So much of it comes back to location and family. I was born here and this is 'home', so I am going to stay right here. This is my 'family' and family is more important than anything. Beyond location and family are all the thoughts we bring to bear around location and family. This can be family histories and memories. But more often, family histories and memories of place become what is called 'nostalgia', or to translate it directly, 'the pain of place', or 'the pain of homecoming'.

All these play out in those who want to follow Jesus, to commit to his way, in our story today.

First, when someone says they want to follow Jesus, Jesus responds with, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*" (vs 58). The problem, as Jesus sees it, is that this person will have to give up a sense of place

and home. There is something comfortable and content with knowing a place, knowing a hometown so well. The cost is very high to up and leave that comfort. Today, when we commit to following Jesus, we live in homes and live in neighborhoods we may have never left since childhood. We don't have to give up location and family to follow Jesus anymore, because we are free to follow whoever we want and so many claim Christianity anyway. We don't have to commit to leaving the comfort of home to go to church to worship Jesus. But for a Samaritan, or even a traditional Jew, in Jesus' day, you had to pay that very high price of leaving behind a sense of place and home, leaving behind the comforts of place and home. And following Jesus won't be comfortable for Samaritans, Jews, or even disciples from this point forward as Jesus heads to Jerusalem.

Would any of us be able to commit to paying that high price of losing our comfort in following Jesus? I ask this of myself as much as I ask it of you.

Second, Jesus asks someone to follow him. Imagine what it would be like to be asked personally to follow Jesus by Jesus. Maybe some of you have had this experience in some mystical way. Anyway, in this time, Jesus would have been like a rock star in Israel. Everyone knew who he was by this point in his journey to Jerusalem. It would be like Elvis or Mick Jagger or Janis Joplin or Ozzy Osbourne asking you to go on tour with them.

But this individual says, *"I gotta go bury my dad, then I will be back"* (vs 59). A 'burial' in the ancient Middle East was a prolonged affair, occupying several days of tending to the body, making a pilgrimage to the family burial site, and then watching over the tomb for a few days. This was just the way it was done, and had been done for ages and ages.

Jesus answers, saying, *"Leave the dead to bury their own dead. As for you, we have some Kingdom preaching to do"* (vs 60). This is profoundly anti-cultural, even anti-social, for someone to say, then and now. Give up all the rituals I have around death and dying for the sake of speaking to people about this new way of thinking about God? Really, Jesus?

In our day and age, the rituals of death and dying have been overtaken by funeral homes and hospitals. They have been systematized and ritualized according to highly specialized fields of service that depend on the economy to function. Back in Jesus' day, death and dying were family affairs. Either way, there are rituals around both. We layer these rituals with ideas about what it means to die, and how we should die, and what death even means. I believe we do all these rituals because we are committed to the fear of death.

Hospitals, funeral homes, and economies rely on our fears to make money and while the individuals who work with hospitals and funeral homes may be excellent people on their own, it would be a mistake to not realize that these institutions exist in part because they

take advantage of our fears around death. Back in Jesus' day, those rituals were also supported by a whole raft of superstitions about what would happen if the ritual were not fulfilled. Superstitions are designed to reinforce fears. Many of us still have superstitions around death, but we have no ritual to attach those superstitions to anymore, and so the fear of death fills everything we do.

But what if we didn't fear death. What if we weren't committed to the fears and superstitions that surround death and dying, and were instead committed to the promises of the God who gives life, and the One who has embodied those promises on Earth, Jesus Christ?

Would we be willing to pay the high cost of giving up our commitment to the fear of death and dying in order to commit to Jesus? I ask this of myself as much as I ask it of you.

Third, another person runs up to Jesus and says, *"I really want to follow you, Jesus, but I have to say goodbye to my family first"* (vs 61). Jesus responds with a strange statement, for us anyway. He says, *"No one who puts their hand to the plow then looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God"* (vs 62). That is kind of harsh, isn't it? But we are talking about commitment here.

Jesus, as we see over and over again in all the Gospels, is in the business of redefining things we just assume to be fixed and objective realities. The sense of home and place is one of those. The nature of death and dying is another. And here, Jesus completely undermines and redefines the idea of family. Family, finally, is not who you say goodbye to; family is who we say "welcome" to and who also welcomes us. We are back to the beginning of our story for today.

The commitment Jesus is challenging here is the commitment to nostalgia. There is no better engine for nostalgia today than social media. *"Name your 5 favorite bands from the 1980s!"*; *"I so love my sister because of the love she shows me"*, *"The best TV shows from 50 years ago"*. The news, our politics, the internet - all of them feed the commitment to nostalgia, the pain of place, the pain of homecoming, as it was called in ancient Greece. Nostalgia is how we are sold the status quo as a continuance of the past, rather than the upheaval of walking into an unknown future, where looking back is actually an act of destruction on a spiritual level.

Even early on in Jesus' ministry, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus was in the business of redefining family and place. There, he gathered in his hometown with the disciples. His mom and brothers came to the door and tried to get Jesus to come home (they thought he had lost his mind - vs 3:21). But Jesus said, *"Who are my mother and brothers?"* Jesus

looks around the room and says, “*Here are my mother and brothers! Whoever commits to God’s desire is my mother, my father, my brother, my sister*” (vs 3:31-35).

Would we be willing to pay the high cost of giving up our commitment to nostalgia in order to commit to the family who follows Christ, to commit to an unknown future guided by this vast, extended family of God? I ask this of myself as much as I ask it of you.

The cost of commitment to following Jesus is very high. It means redefining our commitment to where we live, which is not home in any earthly sense, but home in the true sense of the Kingdom of God. It means redefining our commitment to how we die and deal with death, since death through Christ becomes a gateway to eternal life. It means redefining the nostalgia of family and the past, because family is now whoever commits to Jesus with me and the past is only a memory that provides a stepping stone to an unknown future with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Even so, the high cost of committing to following Jesus has a very high pay-off as well. Committing to Jesus means we welcome others and are welcomed into our true home with God, living with the knowledge and experience of eternal life always present, in the presence of the ongoing and ever-present family of God, the communion of saints, which also happens to be you and I.

Pay the high cost. I ask it of you as much as I ask it of myself. Commit and follow Christ. Amen.