

June 26, 2022
Luke 9:51-62

Pentecost 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Followers, Not Admirers”

“When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

Dave Presuto was one of my best friends in high school. We met in Grade 7 and immediately discovered that we shared many similar interests: we were both fans of the New York Rangers, we enjoyed a lot of the same music and movies, and we both had a remarkably similar sense of humour. We also shared following our high school’s football team; but in this interest we parted ways, because while Dave was on the field during the games I watched from the safety of the stands. Dave was the starting offensive tackle and was in the middle of the action, while I was in the marching band and watched the often-violent game from a safe distance. Dave was truly a participant in the game, while I was a mere spectator.

There is an enormous difference between being a spectator and a participant, between being a follower and an admirer. A spectator observes the action from a distance, while a participant gets out of their seat and into the action. An admirer watches what is happening and can offer supportive words to those who are participants, but usually declines an invitation to become involved, to be a follower. Spectators and admirers may consider themselves members of the team or group they support from the sidelines, but until they get into the action, they cannot really be considered to be true followers or participants.

This difference between spectators and participants, between being on the field or on the sidelines, is at the heart of today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, a critical moment in the Gospel that signals a change in direction in Luke’s narrative and Jesus’ itinerary. Jesus moves from ministry in Galilee to begin travelling to Jerusalem; this is the beginning of Luke’s extended travel narrative that features Jesus’ teaching about God’s kingdom and Israel’s restoration and includes many of the uniquely Lukan parables (such as the Prodigal Son). But this change of destination from Galilean ministry to Jerusalem mission is no whim of the moment; Luke makes clear Jesus’ intentionality to go to Jerusalem when he reports that “*when the days drew near for him to be taken up, [Jesus] set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” (9:51). These words echo the account of Elijah’s death (“*As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven.*” – 2 Kings 2:11) and will be referenced by Luke at the

beginning of Acts (“... until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.” – Acts 1:2). Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem fully aware that his ministry is moving swiftly to its close. He is to be “received up,” an expression that will later be used to refer to his Ascension (“While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.” – 24:51). In reporting that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” Luke is echoing the Servants Songs of Isaiah which anticipate the strong opposition that Jesus will face as the fulfillment of this prophecy:

- “I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting. The Lord God helps me; therefore I have set my face like flint; and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.” – Isaiah 50:6-7.

No sooner has Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” than he meets with opposition. As Malachi declares that “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me” (Malachi 3:1), Jesus “sent messengers ahead of him” (9:52). These messengers enter a Samaritan village to make arrangements for Jesus, “but they did not receive him” (9:53). The fact that a Samaritan village would refuse to receive Jewish pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem is not unusual, given the animosity that existed between the two groups. The lack of welcome is also explained by Luke “because his face was set toward Jerusalem”; while Jews believed that Jerusalem was the only proper location for Jewish worship, Samaritans worshipped at Mount Gerizim.

James and John’s reaction to this rejection by the Samaritans echoes Elijah’s answer to the officer sent by the king of Samaria: “If I am a man of God, let fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty.” (2 Kings 1:12). They ask Jesus if he, like Elijah, desires that they “command fire to come down from heaven and consume them” (9:54). But Jesus is not like Elijah, as earlier declarations of his identity have made clear; his mission is not to destroy but to save and reconcile: “Misunderstanding the identity of the one they followed, the disciples mistakenly thought they could achieve his ends by violence.” (Alan Culpepper). In contrast to James and John, Jesus shows no desire for judgment to come upon these Samaritans. Instead, “he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.” (9:55-56). “The present tense of Jesus’ ministry in Luke is about restoration, not vengeance. So, it is not surprising that Jesus rejects the idea of enacting judgment. Instead, the group moves on ‘to another village’ (potentially another Samaritan village).” (Jeannine K. Brown). In Acts, Luke will highlight that Samaritans receive the good news of the Messiah (“Philip went down to the city of Samaria and

proclaimed the Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did ... So there was great joy in that city.” – Acts 8:6-8).

As Jesus continues his journey toward Jerusalem, he is met by three would-be disciples who show that they have not understood the demands of discipleship and are not prepared to give it the priority that Jesus demands. In response to the first potential follower who declares that *“I will follow you wherever you go”* (9:57), Jesus contrasts the security of the Son of Man with the condition of animals at the mercy of nature: *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”* (9:58). Implicitly, the saying works on the assumption that the follower will be like the one who is followed: if the Son of Man has no place to lay his head, then neither will those who follow him. Being a follower of Jesus may require the sacrifice made by Jesus’ first disciples when *“they left everything and followed him”* (5:11).

While the first would-be disciple approached Jesus, Jesus now approaches another potential follower with the classic invitation to discipleship: *“Follow me.”* (9:59). This candidate for discipleship is interested but makes a simple and reasonable request: *“Lord, let me go and bury my father.”* The duty to bury the dead was binding on all devout Jews (*“you shall bury him the same day”* – Deuteronomy 21:23). Jesus’ response, however, appears harsh: *“let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God”* (9:60); priority of service to God’s Kingdom is to be set above every other priority. Another way to look at this saying is to understand Jesus’ command as meaning *“let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead,”* implying that others who had not come alive to the sovereign rule of God could discharge the duty of burying the dead. Those who have responded to the call to discipleship are no longer dead; therefore, their concern should be with life and the living as they *“go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*

The third would-be disciple offers to follow Jesus but asks permission to bid farewell to his family first: *“I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”* (9:61). While Elijah allowed Elisha to *“let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you”* (1 Kings 19:20), Jesus will not let this potential follower to turn aside from the call to follow him even to bid farewell to his family: *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* (9:62). If one looks back while plowing, the furrow will be crooked; Jesus emphasizes again the unconditional demand of the call to discipleship: *“On the way to the cross there*

is no place for rash promises or misunderstandings regarding the cost of following Jesus.” (Alan Culpepper).

While Jesus’ warnings may appear harsh and even cruel, they are in fact words of loving concern for those who as yet do not understand the costs associated with being a disciple of Jesus Christ. Had Jesus not taught such potential followers that “*if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*” (Matthew 16:24), his call to discipleship might have been misunderstood as an ethereal ideal rather than a call to action that required commitment and sacrifice:

- “The one who has set his face like a firm stone to go to Jerusalem has no bargains to offer. The radicality of Jesus’ words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships.” – Fred Craddock.

Jesus is warning anyone who is desiring to become his follower that discipleship is not a spectator sport. One cannot truly follow Jesus from the sidelines; to be a follower means that one needs to join Jesus in the field of discipleship, to leave behind all former allegiances and priority so that all one’s energy and commitment may be focused on the task that our Lord has set before his followers. Paul speaks of this commitment in his letter to the Philippians as one who left behind his former life so that he might be the apostle to the Gentiles, fulfilling Jesus’ command that his followers be his witnesses “*to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8):

- “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this 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 heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” – Philippians 3:12-14.

After a victory on Saturday afternoons, we would sometimes speak of how “we” won the game, as if we were there on the field competing against the opposing team. But while we cheered our team to victory and admired their efforts in winning the game, we had nothing to do with this result. The call to discipleship is a call to get onto the field of mission and discipleship; one cannot truly be a follower of Jesus from the sidelines, because Jesus never called anyone to be an *admirer* but called them to be *followers*:

- “It is well known that Christ consistently used the expression ‘follower.’ He never asks for admirers, worshippers, or adherents. No, he calls disciples. It is not adherents of a teaching but followers of a life Christ is looking for ... His whole life on earth, from beginning to end, was destined solely to have followers and to make admirers impossible.” – Soren Kierkegaard.

We are not told if any of these three would-be followers accepted Jesus’ invitation to discipleship and all that it demanded of them, but we do know that on other occasions many who were interested or had even been his followers found the demands to be too great for them to accept. After responding to a rich man’s question as to *“what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* (Mark 10:17), Jesus looks at him, *“loved him and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”* (10:21-22). After hearing Jesus’ teaching in which he reveals himself as *“the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty”* (John 6:35), many of those who were already among his disciples respond that *“this teaching is too difficult; who can accept it?”* (6:60); and *“because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.”* (6:66). But when Jesus asks the twelve, *“do you also wish to go away?”* Simon Peter speaks on behalf of all who continue to remain steadfast followers of Christ: *“Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”* (6:68-69). Peter and the Twelve know that being a follower of Jesus means actively participating in his life and mission; discipleship is not a spectator sport. It is not enough to admire Jesus or believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God; Christian discipleship is truly *“faith active in love”* (Martin Luther), following the one who calls us to follow him in the way of the Cross that also leads to resurrection and life and the assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer teaches what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ in the modern world and the cost that it requires of Christians in every generation who like the first disciples leave behind former allegiances to follow him:

- “Discipleship means adherence to Christ, and, because Christ is the object of that adherence, it must take the form of discipleship. An abstract Christology, a doctrinal system, a general religious knowledge on the subject of grace or on the forgiveness of sins, render discipleship superfluous, and in fact they

positively exclude any idea of discipleship whatever, and are essentially inimical to the whole conception of following Christ ... Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”

Discipleship does mean sitting at Jesus’ feet and learning what it means to believe in him; this is why the church remains committed to instructing our children and adults what we believe as Christians and the faith that is at the foundation of the Church that bears Christ’s name. But this teaching is always followed by our call to action, to getting out onto the mission field and serving others in Christ’s name. We charge parents and godparents at baptism to instruct their children about the faith into which they have been baptized “*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.*” (ELW Holy Baptism). As we conclude our time in worship, we are called to “*go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord,*” a recognition that our lives as the disciple community continue as we leave our worship gathering and go forth to continue to witness the love of God that is for all people in Christ Jesus our Lord:

- “Sending is a time for again recalling our baptism; this time for taking our baptismal calling with us into our daily vocation. It is a time for sending and being sent; a time to thank God for the gifts of this assembly and prepare to extend them into the community. It is a time to gather up the gifts of bread and wine so that they can be sent to those who were absent that day; a final time to thank God for those gifts.” – Loraine S. Brugh and Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Sunday Assembly*.

My friendship with Dave Presuto did not demand that I join him on the football field, where I had neither the talent nor the courage to perform. But all of us are called into the field of discipleship through our baptism into Christ; we who have been baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection know that this “*love so amazing, do divine demands my soul, my life, my all*” (ELW Hymn 803). Jesus never calls anyone to be a spectator or an admirer; we are called to be active participants in the continuation of his mission, to share his love with others as we live out our calling as God’s own people to proclaim in word and deed “*the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9). Amen.