

What Discipleship Looks Like Today

Luke 9:57-62

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ July 15, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸ 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.” ⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:57-62, NRSV)

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You can't spend too much time in the church without sooner or later hearing that Jesus calls us to be his disciples. In this church you're going to hear that sooner rather than later. It's something we have been talking about with increasing frequency and interest recently. To be a Christian means to be a disciple of Christ. Our own mission statement declares that we are *a community loving Christ, building disciples, serving all.*

But what does it mean to be a disciple? Someone who goes to worship on Sundays? Someone who believes all the right things about Jesus? Someone who studies the Bible and prays every morning? Someone who does kind things for the poor? Someone who votes for the “right” candidates and the “right way” on certain issues? Some people imagine that disciples are only the all-stars among Christians, the super-spiritual who work their way to the head of the heavenly class.

I love our passage today because it is here that Jesus concretely spells out for us what discipleship looks like for ordinary Christians like us on ordinary days like today. Luke gives us here three encounters with three potential disciples. We shouldn't assume that these all happened on the same day along the same road, one after the other. Maybe they did; maybe they didn't. Luke may simply be incorporating a three-fold pattern of storytelling that was common in those days, recalling three separate incidents that had occurred at some point along the way and placing them here side by side to give the church some very practical teaching on everyday discipleship.

To begin with there is the person who comes to Jesus and says to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

It's as succinct and beautiful a definition of discipleship that you will find in the whole Bible; a disciple is simply one who follows Jesus wherever he goes. We don't know anything about the motivation behind this statement, but clearly this is a person who has seen something in Jesus that compelled them to make such a bold commitment.

So why would Jesus respond to such a remarkable statement of commitment with warning rather than encouragement? You're sixteen years old and you are convinced you've found your true love and so you say to your girlfriend one night, almost without thinking about it, “I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” But your geometry homework isn't finished yet and you're not even sure you're going to pass geometry and the truth is, when it comes down to it, you are barely able to make commitments for next weekend, and now you're committing the next 60 or 70 years to be with this other person?

Clearly Jesus suspects something similar is going on here and so he says in response, “**Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.**” He's not turning the person away necessarily, but lovingly making sure he understands where the road leads that he is declaring he's ready to travel. It's a hard road. Jesus will spend his life making himself totally dependent on the hospitality and kindness of others. He has no earthly security. No home. No savings. No back up plan. He is trusting that his Father will provide what is needed along the way. ‘Daily bread’ is the way he sometimes talked about it.

Here's one way this challenges us. We live immersed in a culture that is absolutely captivated by the pursuit of material comfort and security. We aren't satisfied only making sure we have what we need for today. We want to make sure that today we are set for tomorrow, and next week, and next year, and all the way to the end of our lives. Who among us wants to be in a place where we are wondering how we will be provided for? Now, I don't believe that God is against prudent financial planning. However, God knows our hearts. If Christ asked you to give away much or all that you have saved to those who have nothing saved, and then told you not to worry as you did so because he will provide for you tomorrow what you will need for tomorrow, would trust him? Of course, I don't know that Christ will ask

you to do that, but what if he did? He's done it before. Would you trust him?

Jesus said himself in the Sermon on the Mount, **“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you.”**¹ The person who trusts his or her investments or possessions more than he or she trusts Jesus to provide materially for them in the future is the person who is not ready to be his disciple. That is the road he is traveling, the road of daily dependence on God, and, just speaking logically, you can't follow Jesus if you're not willing to go where he is going.

In the next instance it's Jesus who says to somebody else, **“Follow me.”** The response is positive but carries with it a stipulation. **“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”** And just so you know, everybody standing around listening to this exchange would have been immediately sympathetic to the person's rationale. You see, in Jewish religious life there was almost no more sacred and pressing duty than the proper burial of a father. This involved not only the initial sealing of the body in the tomb after death, but a secondary burial which followed a twelve-month period of decomposition when the bones were collected and then reburied in an ossuary, or 'bone box', which would have been placed alongside the remains of other deceased relatives in the family tomb. Those twelve months would then be a time for a son to complete the work of mourning. The whole process, in fact, would have taken precedence over the study of the law, temple service, the killing of the Passover sacrifice, and the observance of circumcision. Failure to follow through with this full burial process would have been scandalous. In other words, there was no good reason to put off this holy and binding duty, meaning that every Jew present that day would have expected Jesus to say in response, “Oh, I see. Of course, do your duty and bury your father. Then come find me afterwards and follow me.”²

But that's not what he said. **“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”** In other words, “Let those already dead in the family tomb take care of the remains of your dead father. There is something far more holy and binding to which you need to give your attention, specifically the proclamation of the coming of the very kingdom of God!” Understand Jesus is not dismissing our duty towards our parents. How could he? The command to honor our father and mother, in life and in death, is a

part of the Ten Commandments! What he's saying is that our honor for Christ must always come first.

And again, the message is simple. Think of the most holy and binding commitments in your life, commitments to your marriage, your parents, your children, your career, your community, your nation. None of those commitments, as sacred even as some of them are, take precedence over our commitment to Christ. In a practical sense, that means that if following Jesus in life leads us in a direction that is contrary to a direction some other commitment is leading us, we must follow Jesus because he is where our ultimate affection and devotion must always lie.

Now this is where lots of people – and maybe some us even this morning – begin to have some serious questions about what Jesus seems to be saying here. He can't mean what it sounds like he means can he? Surely Jesus doesn't want me to put my devotion to him above my devotion to my own family! And so Luke, I suspect anticipating such a reaction, includes a third example of another person who comes along and promises Jesus, **“I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”** Once I get things squared away with my family, then I'll be ready to be your disciple.

There is a story in I Kings about the time the prophet Elijah called Elisha to come and be his apprentice. Elisha promised to follow Elijah but asked if he could first run home and kiss his father and mother before he left. Elijah granted the request. It must have seemed reasonable enough.³ Not so with Jesus, however, who instead responds, **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”** One paraphrase puts Jesus' response this way, **“No procrastination. No backward looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.”**⁴

Clearly Luke doesn't want any confusion here. A Christian is a *disciple* of Jesus, not just somebody who only believes in Jesus but somebody who is ready to follow Jesus wherever he goes. And that means – listen carefully here – that loyalty to Jesus *takes precedence over even our primary family obligations*. A Christian is to be more loyal to Christ than to a husband or wife. A Christian is to be more loyal to Christ than to a son or daughter. A Christian is to be more loyal to Christ than to a mother or father.

Now sometimes, to be honest, as we increase our devotion to Christ it will diminish our devotion to our own family. Some of you know what it's like to be

¹ Matthew 6:25, 33.

² Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans, 1997), 407-408

³ See I Kings 19:19-21

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (NavPress, 2002).

scorned by people in your family because of your Christian faith. You haven't wanted distance with those you love, but they have insisted on it because they are disappointed, or even offended, by your devotion to a path they think is a mistake. Others of us have been called to follow in a direction that is contrary to the direction others in our family are headed because they are not following after Jesus. That's bound to cause some painful separation or at least diminishment in those relationships. How many of us have experienced that to some extent? Jesus acknowledged this very likely possibility when he declared, **"Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."**⁵ When we are forced to choose between devotion to Christ and devotion to a loved one, our devotion to Christ must always take precedence.

On a mission trip to Mexico some years ago I met a man named Nestor. I worked side by side with him on a construction project at his church. Because he spoke a little English and I spoke a little Spanish, I was able to hear parts of his story throughout the week. He described to me how just a few years before his life had been in shambles. He did not know God and was living for himself. He was out of work, and out of money, and his marriage was on the rocks. Then he told me how, through a series of events, he came to know God and surrendered the leadership of his life over to Jesus. He became a disciple. And from that moment his life was transformed. He told me his marriage might have been what changed the most.

So I asked him, "What do you mean? What changed about your marriage?" And he told me something that I will never forget. He said, "Jeff, from that day on, I never again held the hand of my wife." And I remember thinking, "What? What's that supposed to mean." His English was pretty broken so I thought maybe I had misunderstood. I even remember thinking that maybe the church in Mexico teaches couples that they shouldn't hold hands. "What do you mean," I asked him, "that you no longer hold the hand of your wife?"

That's when he told me, "I no longer hold the hand of my wife. Instead, I hold the hand of Jesus." And because I think he could tell that I still wasn't getting it, he went on and said, "You see, Jeff, I hold the hand of Jesus. And my wife holds the other hand of Jesus. And then through Him, we are united." For him, Christ was first, even above his wife.

The radical nature of Jesus' words here suggest that he is laying claim to priority over even the best

relationships, not just the worst. We're not being asked here to choose between Jesus and the devil, or between worshipping false gods or the true God, but ultimately to choose to place our ultimate devotion towards Jesus over even the most cherished people in our lives. My wife needs to be more devoted to Christ than she is to me. I need to be more devoted to Christ than to my own children. But the remarkable thing is, when we worship Christ above all we eventually discover that we have been set free from the worship of our families and have, in turn, found the distance necessary to truly love them with a selfless, sacrificial love, the sort of love we were not capable of before.⁶ I have no doubt that Nestor loved his wife more deeply after he placed her second to Jesus in his life because it was Jesus who taught him how to truly love his wife with the deepest kind of love.

A quick word here, by the way, to those of us who find ourselves married to a spouse who is not a Christian. This happened all the time in the early church as one person in a family would be saved and then suddenly find themselves married to somebody who didn't believe. In his letter of 1st Corinthians Paul has these gracious words to those in the church in this position, **"And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband."**⁷ I'm certain Paul would give the same counsel to Christian husbands with unbelieving wives. Marriage is a sacred bond, even when not shared between two Christians, and God honors that bond, even wants to be at work in that relationship to lead whole families back home to himself through the witness of one faithful family member. I know many in our own church who are in this place. It's hard place at times because following Jesus alongside one who has no intention of doing the same can lead to some hardship and pain, but I'm so encouraged by many of you who continue to love, and serve, and pray for your partner. Do not underestimate what God can do in time.

With all these qualifications and explanations, however, the simple truth remains that Jesus says to us, in respect even to our families, that we are only fit to be his disciples if we put our hand to the plow and never look back. Now, for those of us here who have never plowed a field, understand that it's not good to look back when your hand is on the plow. Even if you look

⁶ I'm borrowing some insights here from Fred B. Craddock, *Interpretation Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching: Luke* (John Knox Press, 1990), 144.

⁷ I Corinthians 7:13-14, NRSV.

⁵ Matthew 19:29, NIV

back and find that you've maintained a straight line so far, the moment you look back is the likely the moment you have ensured that the next bit you plow will be crooked.⁸ So there is no looking back. Now is the time to look and move *forward* after Jesus if you are his disciple. Seize the day.

I've served in leadership in the church now for nearly 30 years. Over that time I have invited lots and lots of people into a life of discipleship, into a life of seeking to go after Jesus wherever Jesus goes. By God's grace, many of them have enthusiastically received the invitation and set out on the journey, none really knowing where it would lead along the way but trusting that Christ is a worthy guide. I have also, however, heard many, many reasons from people why "now" is not the time to pursue Christ more deeply. One person talks about how work or school is so busy right now. When things settle down he will be able to give more of his attention to Christ. Another person with young children has determined that the kids need to be the main focus right now. When they get older, it's imagined, it will be easier to make Christ the main focus. But then I meet the parent with teenagers who can't possibly imagine making discipleship a focus during such a hectic season of life. And then I remember the retired person who has always imagined this final season of life as a time to travel, and rest, and enjoy the grandkids. It's common, in fact, to hear people use their advanced age as an exemption for discipleship, as if they have forgotten just how many senior citizens God called and used in the Bible to do extraordinary things.

Here's my point, and I hope I can make it gently. If you are invited to follow Jesus as his disciple, to commit your life above all else to going where he goes, there is *never a convenient time to do make that commitment*. Do you understand what I'm saying? There is no excuse you could give to Jesus to which he would respond, "Oh, I see. Yes, why don't you focus primarily on that for now and in a few years we'll talk again." No, there is never a convenient time to make following Christ the central pursuit of your life. But what that means is that the best time to follow Christ is today because today is as good as any day. The time is now.

You see, there is urgency in Christ's words here which we would be foolish to dismiss. God has work for you to do now, a desire for you to join him in the building of his kingdom by seeking justice, sharing good news, helping others to become disciples themselves. If you make following him more imperative than your studies, your work, your marriage, your kids, everything else in

life, he will set you free to then become the sort of student, or employee, or parent, or husband or wife you never imagined you could be. Your days on this earth, right up to the last, will take on the flavor of abundant life in ways you never before thought possible.

I've heard discipleship put this way.⁹ If you are a disciple you live your life as Jesus would live your life if he were in your shoes. You believe that Jesus is right about everything, even when he just told you something that seems dead wrong. You believe the way he is leading you is the best way, even when it looks like a dead end from where you stand. Grace is central to this, of course, because we can't follow Christ without his help, and so grace is simply God at work doing in our lives what we don't deserve and what we can't accomplish on our own.

But we are active in the process. In 2nd Peter we are told, "**Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**"¹⁰ We are active in the journey of course, submitting, releasing, trusting, acting, stepping forward in faith as we do the things Jesus tells us to do, conduct the ordinary activities of our daily lives in the character and power of Christ, and commit ourselves to the promotion of good and the demise of evil. It happens in community, alongside others, and rooted in the Word, and bathed in prayer and other time-worn spiritual practices which shape us inside and out to reflect Christ to others.

You know, everybody is arranging their life around something. There is no way around it. Did you know that? And as I've said before, you need to know what it is for you. When you come to important crossroads in life – should you turn right or left? – and your decision is primarily informed by which direction will lead you to greater financial security, then you are arranged your life around material wealth. That is your god. If every major decision you make is made only after asking how it will impact your family, your family has become your idol. Everybody is arranging their life around something in life and it is only the fool who doesn't have the self-awareness to know what it is.

The Christian is following Christ, arranging his or her entire life around Him, seeking his leading at every crossroad and in every decision. There are a thousand missteps along the way, of course, but thankfully grace is sufficient. But as Dallas Willard writes, "Disciples

⁹ This and the next paragraph are summarizing an article by Dallas Willard entitled "How Does the Disciple Live?" Read the full article at <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/how-does-the-disciple-live>

¹⁰ II Peter 3:18, NRSV

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 119.

are those who, seriously intending to become like Jesus from the inside out, systematically and progressively rearrange their affairs to that end, under the guidance of the Word and the Spirit. That is how the disciple lives.”¹¹

Does that describe your life? Do you want it to describe your life? Notice that Luke doesn't tell us what any of the three potential disciples decide to do after they hear Jesus' response. Is the first one willing to follow a Master who has nowhere to lay his head at night? Does the second one agree to let the dead bury the dead? Does the third one decide to put a hand to the plow without looking back? We aren't told. Here's why. To each of us Jesus extends the same invitation, **“Follow me?”** So it's not relevant this morning what these three decided to do. The only relevant decision as far as you are concerned is the one you make today for yourself because now is the time for you to follow Jesus. It's always now.

We all watched with our hearts this week as those twelve boys and their coach were rescued from the cave in Thailand. Could there have been a more joyous outcome for them, though one man did give his life for them to help achieve it? I don't think it's too big a stretch to see in this whole incident a beautiful picture of Jesus' invitation to discipleship. You see, these boys were trapped in a cave where they could survive for some time. It was far from an ideal space, but they had water, and food, and one another and even, at times I'm sure, some laughter together. But they could not last there long. Furthermore, they knew there was something far, far better beyond, better in every last way. But to get from what was to what could be they had to each trust another who came to meet them where they were, even at the cost of death, to lead them home.

Would you agree that it would only be the fool among them that would refuse the offer to follow the one who came to lead them out of the cave, even though doing so would bring great risk? Yes, the journey out would be terribly difficult. It would require an absolute, moment by moment reliance on the one leading them. That difficult journey was the only way out. And yet today, do you think a single one of those boys regrets their decision to follow? Not in the least.

It's been said before that you are no fool if you give up that which you can never keep to gain that which you can never lose.¹² Here's how Jesus put it, **“Those who**

want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose their very soul?”¹³

Jesus invites each of us to follow him. The time to do so is today. It's always today. Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. What's your favorite excuse for not something, your 'go to' procrastination?
2. Read Luke 9:57-62 again. Pay attention to these three interactions. What stands out to you?
3. Going through them one at a time, what do you think Jesus is saying in each of his three responses? How do these responses apply to us today?
4. Is Jesus suggesting here that our loyalty to him is to take precedence over our most cherished family obligations and relationships?
5. Luke doesn't tell us how each of the three people in these stories ultimately responded to Jesus. Why is that? Aren't you curious to know what they decided?
6. If Jesus were to say to you today, “Follow me.” In the most practical sense, what would that mean for you?
7. Name one thing (there are likely many for all of us) that would change immediately if you began to arrange everything in your life around Christ.
8. In Luke 9:24-25 Jesus declares, **“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but lose their very soul?”** What does he mean? Do you believe him?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

If we tried to follow Jesus this week everywhere he went, where do you think he would lead us?

¹¹ Dallas Willard, “How Does the Disciple Live?”

¹² The quote is from Jim Elliot, a missionary who was martyred in 1956 in Ecuador. He not only said it but lived it.

¹³ Luke 9:24-25.