

Things Keep Getting in the Way

Luke 9:51, 57-62

Sermon preached by Charles C. Williamson

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The Bible is a book about people on the move. We heard it earlier, when Brett read the Old Testament lesson. When God called Abraham, the first word God said to Abraham was, “Go.” “Go from your country, your kindred and your father’s home to the land that I will show you.” And in response to God’s call Abraham packed up his family and went, not really sure where God might be leading him.

As the story of the Hebrew people that is told in the book of Genesis unfolds, the descendants of Abraham traveled down to Egypt where they lived for several hundred years. It seemed that Egypt might become their home, but No, God led them out of Egypt and for forty years the Hebrews wandered through the wilderness. Again they were not sure of their destination, just that they were on a journey and God was leading them.

The Hebrews were nomads, wanderers. They were a people on the move. One of the oldest statements of faith is found in Deuteronomy, and it says, “A wandering Aramean was my father... (26:5).”

All of these journeys are literal journeys as the people travel from place to place, but they can also be understood on another level. Throughout the Bible the journey is used as a way to describe the faithful life. The faithful life is not about the destination, but about the journey. The early Christian church was often called “People of the Way.” They were people on the move, people on a journey, a spiritual journey.

One of the great classics of Christian literature is *Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. It was written back in the 1600s. The full title is *The Pilgrim’s Progress From This World to That Which Is to Come*. It’s a story about a man named Christian who is on a journey to the Celestial City. The book tells of Christian’s experiences, how along the way Christian gets bogged down in quicksand named Discouragement; he meets a man named Mr. Worldly Wise who tries to divert him from his journey. On his journey he has to climb the Hill of Difficulty, and as he travels he is carrying the burden of his sin. The book is an allegory in which the Christian life is compared to a journey.

The \$10 theological word that describes this faith journey is “sanctification.” Sanctification is the idea that faith is a process. Sanctification makes it clear that we have never arrived, but that we are always a work in progress, always on a journey. Sanctification affirms that all through our life’s journey, the Holy Spirit is working in us to help us to grow in our faith. And the process of sanctification never has an end point: from the day of our birth to the day of our death, we can grow in our faith and in our relationship to God. As long as we live, we have never arrived; we are always on the journey.

You can also see this journey motif in the gospels as well. We’ve seen it several times already as we have been reading through the Gospel of Luke these past several weeks. Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him and be his disciples. And so they drop their fishing nets and follow Jesus. And with that their journey with Jesus begins.

Jesus then calls others to follow him. Luke 6 tells the names of the twelve disciples, those traveling with Jesus. In Luke 8, we learn that others have joined in, including some women who have become a part of the group accompanying Jesus on his journey: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others.

As you read these stories, you see really two journeys going on at the same time: one is the literal journey that Jesus and his followers are on as they travel from place to place. But at the same time the disciples are also on a spiritual journey as they grow in their relationship with Jesus, as they grow in their faith.

Up to this point in Luke's gospel, you can understand why people would be drawn to follow Jesus. They've seen Jesus heal the sick, raise the dead, befriend sinners, welcome the unloved. They've seen him calm an angry storm; they've seen him feed 5000 people with only five loaves and two fish. Who wouldn't be drawn to someone with those kinds of powers?

But with our passage today, the tone shifts somewhat. Our passage today begins with an ominous line: "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus had already told his disciples that there would come a time when he would suffer and die (Luke 9:21-22). And now the time has come for him to "set his face toward Jerusalem" where these things would take place. From this point on Jesus' journey is taking him to Jerusalem and to the cross.

As Jesus is resolutely following God's call, the disciples are continuing to follow. And today's passage tells of others who want to join in. One person says, "I will follow wherever you go." Another comes and wants to join the group of followers, then still another.

But here Jesus begins to teach that if you would truly be a follower of Jesus, it's going to cost you something; it's going to require that you make sacrifices. The first would-be follower comes to Jesus and says, "I will follow wherever you go." And Jesus replies, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." That is to say: the journey with Jesus is not the easy, comfortable way. It's going to take you to places you may not want to go; it's going to require sacrifice.

The second person comes and says, "I will follow you, but first let me go bury my father." Then the third: "I will follow you, but first let me go say goodbye to my family." Now neither of these people is making an unreasonable request. Love of family, fulfilling family obligations—those are good and honorable things. But to each of these would-be followers Jesus says, in so many words, "If even the noblest of obligations and responsibilities keep you from following me, then you are not fit to be a disciple."

"Whoever puts a hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God," Jesus says. Since I personally have never plowed a field, I can only guess what this verse might mean. But I imagine that if you are plowing a row, you better keep your eyes forward toward where you're headed. I imagine that if you've plowed half a row then look back to see where you've been, the second half of the row is going to twist and turn all over the place.

You can picture someone who has joined in with Jesus' followers, but is continually thinking about what he or she has left behind. That person's discipleship is constantly being diverted from the one thing of being with Jesus by the many things that distract and take us off the path.

So here's the point in the sermon when I have to make a personal confession: I hate preaching about discipleship. Because every time I do, I am reminded yet again what a miserable and conditional disciple I am. I do want to be a follower of Jesus, but so many other things keep getting in the way. I've got a mortgage to pay; I've got family obligations; I'm trying to save for retirement; I'm willing to spend an occasional night in the Kerr Building for Room in the Inn, but not every night. I'm willing to bring some canned goods for the Yellow Bag program occasionally, but I'm not going to go overboard about it. I keep putting limitations on my own willingness to follow Jesus. I'm like this person who puts his hand to the plow but keeps looking back, and I know what a wiggling, twisting row of discipleship I am plowing.

I believe that being a follower of Jesus is a demanding, costly thing, and I see how often in my own life I am not willing to meet those demands or pay those costs. I'm probably not going to be like Albert Schweitzer and pack up and leave my comfortable life to be a missionary in some remote place in Africa. I'm probably not going to be like Father Damien and become a pastor to a leper colony. I'm probably not going to be like Al and Gail Beisiegel, whom we heard this morning in Sunday School, who go three or four times a year to work at an orphanage in Haiti.

I put limits on my discipleship, and for that I ask God's forgiveness.

Which brings me back to this idea that the faithful life is a journey, that sanctification is a life-long process of growing. Maybe that same thing can be said about being a disciple, a follower, of Jesus—it's a journey. We don't begin our discipleship journey as complete, perfect, "got it all together" disciples. But we do stay on the journey, seeking more and more each day to become the kind of followers Jesus wants us to be.

In fact, I think that's the way it was with those original 12 disciples. Look at Peter, for example. There were times that he seemed to get it and other times seemed not to have a clue what it meant to be a disciple...even to the point where when the heat was on, he denied even knowing Jesus. That's not a picture of a disciple who is willing to follow Jesus anywhere.

Or there were James and John who even as they are on the road with Jesus going to Jerusalem where Jesus is going to be crucified, they got in an argument with each other about which one was the greatest disciple. Again, that's not what true discipleship is about—it's not about who's the greatest, but who is willing to be a servant.

If these ones who spent three years watching Jesus' every move, hearing Jesus' every word, seeing everything that Jesus did, if they kept messing up in their discipleship, then it is understandable that we too often fall short of what it means to be a true follower of Jesus. What Jesus asked of them, and what Jesus asks of us, is that we stay on the journey, stay in relationship with him and pray that the Holy Spirit continue to work in us to help us grow more and more in Christ's likeness and image.

That's my prayer. ✠