



Sunday June 26, 2022  
Luke 9:51-62 (Third Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Every once and awhile people will stop me throughout the week to tell me that they enjoyed my sermon from the previous Sunday – that they felt it was speaking directly *to them*. My response is to tell them that this often seems to be the case when it's a sermon I've most needed to hear or preach to myself.

Well, this week is one of those weeks. The gospel for this week is a difficult one. Not because it's hard to understand, but because Jesus's words cut right to my heart with their clarity and urgency – asking for a response.

Today's gospel is a difficult one because it's confrontational and it doesn't leave much, if any, wiggle room. We're either looking toward the kingdom or we're not. We're either responding to the call of life, or we're not. We're either open to the coming future or we're not. We're either following Jesus...or we're not. Jesus is calling us into question and that's never easy, fun, or comfortable. He's calling into question the direction of our life, the values we claim to hold, and how we're living out those values.

In today's gospel, we find a series of people coming to Jesus, saying that they want to follow him. And this *seems* like it would be great news. Jesus's message is getting across, and people are interested. But Jesus rebukes each one. The first says, "I will follow you wherever you go," and Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." What Jesus is really saying is, "*wherever* I go also means nowhere – at least nowhere that's safe, comfortable, or secure. So, are you sure you mean it?"

Jesus extends the invitation, "Follow me" to another, and they respond, "Lord, first let me bury my father." Jesus, is apparently unmoved by the request and says, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." A third offers to follow Jesus, "but first," he says, "let me say farewell to those at home." And Jesus responds, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We don't know what happens next for any of these individuals - if they stay with Jesus or if they say, "forget it, it's not worth it." What we do know is that the gospel doesn't wait – it moves with or without them.

This teaching of Jesus seems to demand our all, and leaves no room for going only so far, no room for *almost* following Jesus. Preacher and theologian Karoline Lewis writes, "When I started thinking about this gospel text, my first response was, Sorry, Jesus. You're wrong. Sometimes we have to bury our dead and you're just going to have to wait. Sometimes we have to say goodbye to those we're leaving or to those we've lost, and we will catch up to you eventually. Sometimes we have a few things that need tending before we jump on the discipleship bandwagon. Like what, you might ask, Jesus? Well, like grief, for example, for those close and personal, but also for whom our world continues to insist cannot be a part of your kingdom. Sometimes we just need some time. Thanks, Jesus."

And I find myself agreeing with her. I want to tell Jesus that at times we have some important things to do that keep us from following You the way we want. Some things that need attending to *first* so that we're actually ready to follow. When I read this text, I want to say, "Hey Jesus – isn't it at least a good thing that these people *want* to follow you? Isn't it better that they want to follow you but just aren't quite ready yet, rather than not wanting to follow you at all?"

All this talk about following Jesus makes me think more deeply about discipleship. If we know Jesus enough to have decided that we want to follow Him, then we must also accept the reality that it most likely means Jesus isn't going to go any easier on us. If we know Jesus and know that we want to commit our lives to following him, Jesus, it turns out, will expect more of us, not less.

A few chapters later in Luke's gospel, Jesus says, "to those who have been given much, even more will be required and entrusted." I think the *more* Jesus is speaking of is *more commitment* and *more responsibility*. If we say we're ready to follow Jesus because we know who Jesus is and know how following Jesus is the very purpose of our being, then Jesus expects us to start following. Not tomorrow. Not eventually. Not when we've tied up loose ends. Not when we've finally got everything figured out. But right now.

When I reread today's gospel, I notice that the second and third people who come and say they want to follow Jesus, start their "Yes, but..." responses to Jesus like this: "Yes, but first let me..." No matter how we try to justify it, all the things we put into the "but first" category when God calls us are just that – things that we place before God.

It's simple and easy to follow Jesus, in principle. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn



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the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. These are values Jesus holds. That's where Jesus is going. That's the direction he's set his face. That's the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good. And most of us probably agree with those values. It's the road we too have chosen to travel – in principle.

But it's so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life than in principle. I believe we're all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until we meet the unlovable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch, or the Samaritan in our life. Then, it's a different story and that story usually begins with, "But first..."

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where he's going, who's included, or what he's offering. He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we're from, or what we've done or left undone. Republican or Democrat, citizen or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, black or white, good or bad, believer or nonbeliever just don't seem to matter to Jesus. For Jesus there is no why, no conditions attached to love, hospitality, forgiveness, or giving. He doesn't allow for a "but first" in his life – or in the lives of his followers.

"But first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional. Yes, I'll love the other but first let me go and see who the other is, whether they are deserving of love, whether I like them, whether they agree with me or my politics or other beliefs. Yes, I'll open my door and welcome the stranger but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different they are from me, what they want, or what I'm risking. Yes, I'll forgive another but first let me go and see if they've acknowledged their wrongdoing, are sorry for what they did, and have promised to change. Yes, I'll give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me. But first....

I wonder, what's really first in your life? Are we saying to Jesus, "I'll follow you," but adding a qualification or disclaimer under our breath, perhaps hoping Jesus won't hear it? God first, but really family first. God first, but really being successful first, sports first, financial well-being first. God first, but really comfort and safety and security first.

When God calls you, and you say yes to following Jesus, what are the "but firsts" that are on the tip of your tongue, or mumbled under your breath, or the truth you really mean instead? How do you finish this sentence to Jesus, "I will follow you Jesus, but first..." But first what?

I don't want to live a "but first" way of life. And I hope you don't either. I want us to turn and lead with our hearts – a deep heart that loves the unlovable, forgives the unforgivable, welcomes the stranger, and gives without seeking a payback or even a thank you.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. I wish I could resolve this in some neat and simple way, as much for myself as for you, but I can't. Because it's not about resolving the gospel. It's about resolving ourselves, resolving our heart. And that resolution isn't a simple or one time decision. It's a way of being in this world, a way of relating to others, a direction for our life. It's a choice we make every day. It's the road to Jerusalem.

I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without a "but first?" I think it would be risky and scary and look pretty crazy. But as I look at the world, read the news, and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So, what if we took a better risk, faced a better fear, and lived a kinder craziness? And what if we were to let that start with you and me, today, in our lives, in our particular situations, and with whoever or whatever is before us?

What's first in your life...really? What's holding you back from saying Yes to God with *your* whole heart? What are your "Yes, but firsts..."?

Whatever they may be, the good news for all of us is that for all our half-hearted discipleship, Jesus' heart beats with forgiveness. For all our hemming and hawing about how things aren't quite right, and the time isn't good, and the situation's less than ideal, Jesus used his voice to proclaim the arrival of the Kingdom of God, right down to his very last breath – Forgive them! For every time we've turned aside, Jesus turned toward the cross. For all our foot-dragging, Jesus' feet kept marching to Jerusalem. For our hands-off approach to following Jesus, Jesus put his hands to do the work the Father had given him until those feet and hands were nailed to a cross instead of ours.

My dear friends, Jesus comes and he gives us not part, not some, but all – his whole self, body and blood for our forgiveness and our salvation. And for this we say, thanks be to God. Amen.