

Philippians 2:1-11

Luke 9:51-62

July 17, 2016

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

On the Road with Jesus

AT ODDS

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Late in the evening of January 27, 1956, a young pastor sat in his kitchen holding a cup of coffee. He was unable to sleep because earlier that evening he had received a threatening phone call: “If you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow your brains out and blow up your house!”

The pastor said, “I bowed down over that cup of coffee . . . I prayed a prayer and I prayed out loud that night. I said, ‘Lord, I’m down here trying to do what’s right. I think I’m right. I think the cause we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I’m weak now. I’m faltering. I’m losing my courage. And I can’t let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak.’ He needed the word of this proverb, ‘Keep your hand on the plow . . .’”

The pastor went on to say, “And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.”¹ And, so, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. continued to lead the Montgomery bus boycott as the newly elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

Between 1942 and 1944, while he was a Fellow and Tutor in English Literature at Oxford University, C.S. Lewis delivered a series of talks on the BBC radio. These talks were originally published in three separate pamphlets: *The Case for Christianity*; *Christian Behaviour*; and *Beyond Personality*. In 1952, Lewis adapted these talks into what has become the classic book, *Mere Christianity*.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “Christ says, ‘Give me all. I don’t want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don’t want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked — the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours.”²

As if those two descriptions of following Jesus Christ when and where he calls aren’t daunting enough, we have the words of Jesus himself: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. . . Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God . . . No

one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:58-62)

Five years ago, Kyle Idleman published a book called *Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus*. The overview of the book on the Barnes & Noble website says, “Are you a follower of Jesus? You may indeed be a passionate, fully devoted follower of Jesus. Or, you may be just a fan who admires Jesus but isn’t ready to let him cramp your style. Then again, maybe you’re not into Jesus, period. In any case, don’t take the question — Are you a follower of Jesus? — lightly. Some people don’t know what they’ve said yes to and other people don’t realize what they’ve said no to.”³

“Some people don’t know what they’ve said yes to and other people don’t realize what they’ve said no to.” That’s a good description of today’s gospel story about Jesus and his disciples on the road to Jerusalem. When I planned this summer sermon series called “On the Road with Jesus,” I probably should have started with this story, especially Luke 9:51: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” That’s how Luke begins his ten-chapter travel narrative that follows Jesus’ meanderings from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. Jerusalem is more than a physical destination for Jesus and Jerusalem is more than a geographical marker for Luke’s gospel. Jerusalem is Jesus’ destiny. Jerusalem provides the theological framework for Luke’s travel narrative. Cut to the chase — Jerusalem is where Jesus is going to die. Luke says, “When the days drew near for him to be taken up...” This can mean Jesus’ ascension to glory, but “taken up” also takes in all of the events leading up to the ascension — Jesus’ betrayal, arrest, suffering, trial, crucifixion, and death. In spite of all of that, “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” In other words, Jesus was determined, faithful, obedient, resolute, unswayed, undeterred on the road to Jerusalem. That is the setting for Jesus’ encounters with would-be followers. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, with everything that implies. What does it mean to follow Jesus on that way?

Rev. Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. One of his best known books is called *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. In some comments about “the call to discipleship” in this story from Luke’s gospel, Rev. Keller remembers hearing a woman named Barbara Boyd speak in 1971. Two of her illustrations made a tremendous difference in his life.

In the first illustration, Barbara Boyd said, “If somebody says to me, ‘Come on in, Barbara, but stay out, Boyd,’ it’s a bit of a problem, because I can’t separate them. It’s not like the top half of me is Barbara, and the bottom half of me is Boyd. So if you won’t have Boyd, you can’t get Barbara. If you’re going to keep the Boyd out, I can’t come in at all. To say, ‘Jesus, come into my life, forgive my sins, answer my prayers; do this for me, do that for me — but don’t be the absolute master of my life; Jesus, Savior, come in; but Lord, stay out,’ how can he come in at all? Because he’s all Savior, and he’s all Lord. He’s Lord because he’s Savior. He’s Savior because he’s Lord.”

Her second illustration reminded me of one of our theology professors in seminary who once complained in class that too many people, instead of accepting and committing to Jesus as Lord and Savior, thought of Jesus as something like their best friend. He said, "It's as if they would call up Jesus and say, 'Come over and give me a back rub!'"

In the second illustration, Barbara Boyd said, "If the distance between the Earth and the sun, which is 92 million miles, was the thickness of a piece of paper, the diameter of our galaxy would be a stack of papers 310 miles high. And our galaxy is less than a speck of dust in the part of the universe that we can see. And that part of the universe might just be a speck of dust compared to all the universe. And if Jesus is the Son of God who holds all this together with the word of his power, is this the kind of person you ask into your life to be your personal assistant?"⁴

If we're honest with ourselves as people who claim to be followers rather than fans of Jesus, his answers on the road to the would-be followers should make us stop and think. Two of the would-be followers offer to follow Jesus — "I will follow you wherever you go . . . I will follow you, Lord." The third would-be follower is called by Jesus himself, "Follow me."

Shouldn't we give the first person some credit for stepping up and pledging to follow Jesus wherever he goes? Jesus doesn't turn him away, but at the same time he doesn't offer a very attractive job description of what it means to follow him.

Shouldn't we cut the second person some slack? After all, Jesus is the one who said, "Follow me." All the person asks is "First let me go and bury my father." That seems like a reasonable, even noble, request. But Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Can't we sympathize with the third person who seems willing to follow Jesus but just wants to say goodbye to family and friends first? But Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Mark Twain was right when he said, "It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand." These are hard sayings of Jesus. But they get at the urgency and importance of responding to God's call in our lives. And we have to hear this call to discipleship in the light of what Jesus himself was doing on the road and where he was headed on the road. As one person has put it, "[Jesus' own words] make an important point about discipleship. Jesus' response to the legitimate requests to postpone the journey reminds Christians in every generation that there are always justifiable excuses to defer the journey or put off the claims of discipleship. Other important matters compete for our attention . . . but there is urgency about Jesus' mission to bring forth God's reign. Jesus compels us to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and must be our first priority."⁵

What about our jobs? What about our families? What about our community responsibilities? What about our commitments? What about the people who depend on us? What about the ties that bind us to our loved ones and neighbors?

Jesus' words about being one of his followers compel and call and challenge us to look ahead and to walk with him. Rather than neglecting or abandoning or rejecting the responsibilities which God has given us — family, friends, community, our faith, our discipleship — we are called to see all of those things in light of our commitment to Jesus Christ. A life of discipleship may be “at odds” with the kind of life we actually live or want to live. But if we walk where Jesus calls us to go, everything will look different in the light of God's love for us in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale said, “Throw your heart over the fence and the rest will follow.” One writer noted that, “Following Jesus is not about head thoughts. It is about heart fence jumping. Because our heart is going where Jesus leads, we jump over all barriers. And where does Jesus lead? Just listen to his advice on how to live. If Jesus says love our enemies, we follow and our creedal statement is in actions not words. If Jesus says visit the sick, we follow and our creedal statement is in actions not words. The list is endless. There is hardly a page in the Gospels that does not point the way for us to go where we have never gone before, where Jesus has gone before us.”

Here's a haiku poem about being a follower, not a fan of Jesus, about our priorities as followers and not would-be followers of our Lord.

*Obstacles leaped by.
Our heart knows no obstruction.
Follow, not later.⁶*

Let us pray: (adapted from the song “I Will Follow”)

Jesus, you have called us: Come, follow me, take up your cross, deny yourself and live. Jesus, we are willing though we are weak. Help us trust you and go where you lead. Jesus, you have shown us how we should live: in sacrifice, humility, and love. Jesus, we are willing though we are weak. Help us follow you with your Spirit in us. Amen.

NOTES

¹Russel Moldovan, “Martin Luther King, Jr.,” www.christianitytoday.com/history, Issue 65: Ten Influential Christians of the 20th Century.

²C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2001), pp. 196-197.

³www.barnesandnoble.com/w/not-a-fan-kyle-idleman

⁴Timothy J. Keller, “The Call to Discipleship, Luke 9:20-25, 51-62,” at www.cslewisinstitute.org.

⁵Marilyn Salmon, “Commentary on Luke 9:51-62,” at www.workingpreacher.org.

⁶Peale comment and thoughts following, including haiku taken from “preachingtip — Proper 8 — Year C,” at www.preachingtip.com.