

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 15, 2017

“Be Homeless and Forget Funerals”

“Jesus Said That?!” part 2

Luke 9:57-62

I am really grateful you are here this morning. You have chosen to worship God together. For some, it’s a habit, and a healthy one. For others, it’s the first time, and I hope this does become a habit for you. I believe that the church is God’s gift to us. It’s a place where we come first and foremost to worship God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It’s also a place where we connect with each other, sharing our joys and finding strength in hard times. That’s what the church is to me, and I hope it is the same for you. Look around you today. You are not alone.

Would you please join me in prayer? Holy Spirit, come and fill this place. Fall upon us as you did in the days of the first disciples. Teach us what it truly means to trust Jesus as Savior and follow him as Lord. Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, God. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you weren’t here last week, you might be a little confused about my message title today, “Be Homeless and Forget Funerals.” We are in the middle of a series of lessons about hard things that Jesus said. I wrote these messages in response to a blog called “50 reasons to be ashamed of Jesus,” written by an ex-Christian who took offense to things Jesus said as recorded in the Bible. I agree with the blogger – Jesus did say some difficult things, but I think these sayings are not a reason to reject Jesus, but rather an opportunity to engage in the Bible and discover more about the Christian life. I don’t take Jesus’ words literally; I take

them seriously. There is a difference. I look at the context in which they were written, as well as the application I think they have for us in modern times. If you disagree with my interpretation, that's fine. But my purpose is to engage these sayings, not lock on to one interpretation and isolate ourselves.

Last week, we talked about the famous expression, "Get behind me, Satan!" which Jesus said to the apostle Peter. We learned God's plan for salvation included the suffering of Christ, even if that didn't make sense to the disciples at the time. We learned that God's plans are better than our own plans, and even when they don't line up with our own expectations. We talked about being living stones, not stumbling blocks, in the kingdom of heaven.

Today we are actually looking at three difficult sayings. A Three-For-One Deal. In Luke 9, Jesus basically says, "#1 - Be Homeless. #2 – Forget Funerals. And #3 – Don't Say Goodbye." All these were said to potential disciples, would-be followers of Jesus.

Notice how this passage starts off with "As they were walking along the road..." (Luke 9:57) If you've ever been hiking, you know that following your leader is a critical skill. My family and I did some pretty extensive hikes in California last summer. High elevations, narrow trails. As we went along, it got pretty strenuous. But Katja and I made sure...OK, mostly Katja...made sure that we didn't ask our children to take on more than they could handle. I believe Jesus is like that – he is not asking us to do more than we are capable of. But he does ask us to follow him and not make excuses.

Have you ever played "Simon Says"? You know the rules. When Simon Says "Go", you go. When Simon Says "Stop", you stop. And you don't listen to anyone else. Yet in real life, people who say they are Christians seem to have

trouble following Jesus, don't they? Do you ever get frustrated when you meet someone who says they believe in God, but it's like a Simon Says game where they never move? The word "Christian" means "little Christ" – and some people's lives indicate that they are not following Jesus at all.

Luke gives us this passage to ferret out would-be followers of Jesus and make sure we don't become them. In this story, three people say that they are ready to follow Jesus, but in reality, each has an obstacle to overcome.

The first man says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." What did that mean in Jewish society? To follow a rabbi, or a teacher, meant to follow in their footsteps, literally and figuratively. The student was to learn the wisdom of his rabbi and become like him. That meant going wherever the rabbi went, listening to him, and living the same way the rabbi did.

I find it interesting that this man initiated the conversation. He makes a pretty bold claim, almost like he is trying to impress Jesus. But Jesus isn't impressed. He does a little mind-reading. Jesus knows this man won't live up to his promise. He won't go anywhere and everywhere with Jesus. Jesus says, basically, to be my disciple you have to be willing to be homeless. Jesus was an itinerant preacher – he traveled wherever God wanted him to go. His ministry was not a life of comfort. There were no Holiday Inn Expresses! And this would-be follower wasn't willing to give up his security and shelter just to follow Jesus.

I have to say, I find this passage somewhat ironic. Jesus said in Matthew 6 that we shouldn't worry. God takes care of the sparrows and the flowers, so we should expect that God will always give us what we need, but not always what we want. So again, I don't think Jesus was literally telling this man to be a homeless

wanderer. Jesus was saying, be ready for inconvenience. The calling trumps comfort.

When I was a freshman in high school, my youth group took a mission trip to the Texas-Mexico border. We served in the slums of Reynosa for an entire week, building houses for the homeless. We stayed in a Catholic center that was sparse and simple – it even had cockroaches. But at the end of the trip, we rewarded ourselves with a three-day stay at a hotel on South Padre Island. I struggled with that. After we had spent so much time and effort with those with so little, we indulged in comfort and luxury. And I felt guilty.

Now, I don't believe you have to become a penniless hermit to follow Jesus. But I do believe you have to embrace inconvenience. Following Jesus takes time. Money. Energy. Humility. When we follow Jesus, and we don't make excuses like, "But it's so hard!" ...then the world notices. Like the world noticed Mother Teresa and called her a saint because she embraced poverty and humility to serve others in the name of Christ.

The first would-be follower gets out of line, and then Jesus speaks to a second man. "Follow me." His response? "Sure thing Jesus, just let me go back and bury my father."

"Forget funerals," Jesus says. Literally, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:60)

Now, this is really a weird exchange. This man was not actively planning his father's funeral. I have presided at 22 funerals in 2 ½ years in Bellaire. Never once have I had someone stand up in the middle of the service and say, "Sorry, I don't have time for this. I have to follow Jesus."

How can the dead bury the dead, literally? Sorry, but I'm not a fan of zombies! My NIV Study Bible tries to explain this phrase away by saying they were "spiritually dead." But I don't buy that explanation, either. Instead, I believe Jesus was using hyperbole – exaggeration to make a point. Eventually – in weeks, months, or even years – this man's father would die, and when the funeral was over, he would start following Jesus. This is the classic, "When I get around to it" excuse. And Jesus doesn't accept it.

We have all heard this excuse before. It comes in many forms:

"I'll make time for God after I finish college and get a job."

"I'll let my children go to church when they are older."

"I'll get back into church after my children grow up."

"I'll start thinking more about faith after I retire."

No offense, but those sound pretty lame to me. First of all, the Bible says to honor God with our youth, before we get old. (Ecclesiastes 12:1) The Bible also says to raise children in the way they should go, so that when they are old, they will continue on that path. (Proverbs 22:6) We are never supposed to delay our decision to follow Christ. If we do that, we reject the power of Christ in our most formative years.

We took our boys to basketball practice yesterday, because we want them to get better at basketball. Doesn't that seem obvious? When it comes to following Jesus and growing in faith, the same principle applies. The sooner, the better.

This isn't about funerals, it's about priorities. It's about making time to serve Christ. Time is the one resource that we all get equal amounts of. The difference is how we choose to spend it. Will we follow Jesus, or procrastinate?

Finally, the last man also speaks to Jesus, with his excuse. "I am ready to follow you, Lord; just give me a moment to say goodbye to my family." Jesus says, "Don't." Look at verse 62. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of heaven."

Really, Jesus? Don't say goodbye to my family first? Actually, this might be a good thing for me. I really hate saying goodbye anyway. It's too mushy.

But I don't think this man merely wanted to say goodbye to his family. I think he was looking for a little vacation time. Spend a holiday with the kids, take a few weeks, maybe a year, and then get back to following Jesus. He needed time to "get ready." Jesus basically told him, "You've got to be all in. There is no second guessing this following business."

I'm going to contradict myself here. Jesus is not saying, "Be homeless, forget funerals, and don't kiss mommy and daddy goodbye." Not literally. What he is saying is this: nothing should stop you from following Jesus. Not hardships. Not grief. Not even family. Those things can only stop you from following Jesus if you let them. The author of Luke is saying that following Jesus has to be your top priority.

Honestly, I love my family. I know that God wants me to honor them. I don't choose to leave them as I follow Christ. But there are times in my faith when I have to choose my priorities carefully. And the beautiful thing is, since they also follow Jesus, they allow me to honor God with my work and my time. I have chosen to make my first three priorities in life to be my God, my family, and my career. In that order.

Raise your hand if Jesus has ever messed up your life. He has mine. Because of Christ, I left a profitable career in engineering with a stable job.

Instead I am threw my lot in with those who are trying to navigate the storms of dying religion, churches in flux, and generations of people who have no religious affiliation. I've been unemployed because of church transition. I have risked my life, my career, my family, and my home to a non-profit organization that is decaying. In many ways, I think I am crazy.

But I've never doubted that it was the right decision to follow Christ, even if it had never led to becoming a pastor. I have followed Christ because he loves me. He lives for me. He has provided forgiveness, strength, encouragement, and comfort in my hardest times. Jesus has shown me a family of believers who call on his name, and who make it their life goal to live for him, not for comfort and convenience. If I'm messed up, I'm in good company. The Apostle Paul had this to say about his life:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in^[a] Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11)

Paul had no confidence in any other part of his life except for Jesus. What about us? Do we have to be perfect to follow Jesus? Goodness, no! The original twelve disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan town that rejected Jesus. You can read that story in Luke, just prior to the one we read today. That's not exactly merciful, what-would-Jesus-do type of behavior. Jesus

had to rebuke them, work on their imperfections and mold them into a world-changing force: the church. That is our faith inheritance, too.

So the question really comes down to this: do you see yourself as a follower of Jesus? Or are you just a spectator? When it gets hard, will you go back to your creature comforts, or will you keep walking, keep working, keep plowing? God's grace is free. The offering Jesus made on the cross covers our sin. That will always be true. We don't earn God's favor. But we can't be content to let the cross be just another good story. The cross is powerful. It changes us, prompts us, provokes us, challenges us. If your life isn't messy, if you don't embrace inconvenience, you aren't really a disciple. Yes, you should love your family...but first follow Jesus. Yes, grieve and comfort others...but first follow Jesus. Use your resources to help Jesus save the world, not for the sake of convenience. It's inconvenient to be a camp counselor, a Sunday School teacher, an organist, a choir member, a pastor. It's inconvenient to walk a few miles in the neighborhood, knocking on doors, inviting people to worship. It's inconvenient to give to causes of justice and mercy and fighting poverty in places you will probably never go. It's inconvenient to pray in public. It's inconvenient to resist responding in anger when you're hurt. It's inconvenient to change your life!

And that's exactly the point. Discipleship was never about convenience. It's about the grace of Jesus Christ. Live your life so that your actions will say to other that Jesus is your number one priority. We can do this, together.

Memory verse

Luke 9:62 – “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Reflection questions

1. What is the most “inconvenient” part of following Jesus for you?
2. What benefits do you experience as a disciple of Jesus?
3. What priorities in your life need to change to be fully committed to Christ?