

“Truth in Advertising”

Luke 9:51-62

June 30, 2019

First Presbyterian Church

Intro to the Reading

How many of you have either read the book or seen the film based on C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*? Well then, you will remember that at the turning point in the story several of the characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words to one another are short but carry great power: “Aslan is on the move,” they say. In today’s Gospel reading something similar is going on. These verses come at the turning point in the story... actually, they begin the second half of Luke’s account of Jesus’ ministry by announcing that having preached and taught and worked miracles in Galilee, Jesus suddenly hears the call to turn his face toward Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there. In other words, Jesus is now on the move.¹

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

⁵⁸And 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.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Sermon

Every preacher I know has certain Bible passages he or she loves to hate... texts that are just hard for you to hear and therefore hard for us to preach. Since Jesus is the source of many of these sayings... I have come to the conclusion that the Lord would not have made a very good pastor. You see, so much of the parish minister’s job depends on making people happy... and then keeping them that way. You have to make it easy for folks to come to church, the literature says... provide them a safe and caring environment where their concerns will be heard, and their needs will be met.

¹ David J. Lose in his essay on this text in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, (WJK, 2010), p. 191

You have to figure out what people are looking for and give it to them (the experts say), or else they'll go shopping for a church down the street. Which means that good pastors work hard to make sure that worship is satisfying, that Christian education is appealing, that there are plenty of opportunities for fellowship and service... and that the restrooms are always fully stocked with paper towels. We're wrestling with this right now in our adult spiritual formation ministry. Sunday school attendance is not what it used to be – and as we talk about this in staff meetings and as a session our default approach is to ask:

How can we make it easier and more convenient?
How can we make it more attractive and interesting?
How can we meet the wants and needs of our members?

Personally, I think an endless supply of donuts is the secret.

Now, there's nothing intrinsically wrong with this, of course... your pastors are called to SERVE the people of this church... our session SHOULD be sensitive to your needs... so there's nothing intrinsically wrong with this... except that it assumes being a Christian... it assumes that following Jesus... it assumes that being a member of a church is mostly about US... when Jesus says it's all about him and his mission. The truth is that you and I spend lots of time trying to "fit Jesus in" to our already busy lives... to "add Jesus on" to our already full list of priorities... when according to Jesus HE must be our one and only Lord... HIS MISSION must be our one and only priority.

He says this in a variety of ways: Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even life itself, cannot be my disciple. You have heard it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. Go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor... and come, follow me. You see what I mean... in an average American congregation, with sermons like that each week, how many members would he have? I figure three or four would shuffle in on Sundays and chances are those would be fooling themselves. And IF a visitor ever wandered in, I imagine him greeting them and saying, "Are you absolutely sure you want to follow me? You know it'll take everything you have. You know I have to come BEFORE everything else that matters to you. So, why don't you go home and think it over? I would hate for you to get in over your head."²

"C'mon Lord, why do you have to keep saying things like that? Can't you at least give me credit for getting out of bed this morning and coming to church? It's summer, for goodness sakes... we're trying to chill for a few weeks – why do you have to say all these hard things?

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "High-Priced Discipleship," Bread of Angels, (Cowley, 1997), p.46-51. This sermon benefits often from her work.

Well, I don't know if this helps very much, but let's remember that when the Lord says these hard things he is on his way to Jerusalem... as I mentioned earlier, he is "on the move" and he knows what a hard road he has ahead of him. Luke knows this as well, because when he writes his gospel, Christians are already being severely persecuted for following Jesus. If one member of your family was a believer, the Romans would arrest everybody. If you were a merchant, your business would be boycotted. Once you made following Jesus your first priority, things really got tough and everything else fell by the wayside - NOT because God took it away from you, NOT because God wanted you to suffer... but because that is how the world works. As long as the world OPPOSES those who live by different rules... as long as the world RESISTS those who would try to change it, those who would change it will pay a very high price. And I think this is what Jesus wants us to know when he talks about foxes and birds... about the dead burying their own dead... about putting your hand to the plow and not looking back. He is not threatening us... far from it, he is loving us... by refusing to lie to us... refusing to do a "bait and switch" ... refusing to make his way sound easier than it really is. So, committed is he to "truth in advertising," he wants us to know very clearly what it costs so that no one follows him under false pretenses.

Now, I know this all sounds terribly dramatic... but that's only because you and I have lost track of what it means to follow Jesus.³ Is it about squeezing Jesus into our lives when we get a free moment? Or about letting him control all of our moments? Is it about being good, contributing citizens... or about changing the world? Is it about creating a safe, nurturing environment where everyone's individual needs are met... or is it about living such a different way of life that those in power get mad and want to kill us? Ernie Campbell, one of the great old-time preachers, once said: "If I'm following Jesus, why am I such a good insurance risk?" Foxes have holes, birds have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head... let the dead bury their own dead... no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God. Discipleship invites us to give all that we have... all that we love... all that we are. Again, this is less God's doing than ours... if the world were more welcoming of God's priorities... if the world were a kinder place to those who live by God's priorities, then, discipleship would be easy - a piece of cake! But that's not how the world is... and Jesus does not want anyone to be fooled.

Well, Jesus may not have made a very good parish pastor, but he sure made a very good savior... and everything I read in the Bible says to me that he is not through saving us yet. It's not over... he is not through saving us yet. Our clue to this in TODAY'S passage is the incredible grace he showed toward the Samaritans who out and out rejected him. Jesus did not judge them... he didn't condemn them... he didn't allow his disciples to call fire down upon them. In fact, he simply moved on... until later in his journey some of them reappear. Remember the one who stopped by the roadside to help someone who was in trouble? Of course, you do - we call him the "good Samaritan." Remember the ten lepers whom Jesus cured... and how only one turned back to say thank you? You're right - it was a Samaritan.

³ Taylor, p. 49.

Apparently, the journey to Jerusalem is a long journey... and the path to full and mature discipleship takes time to walk, and much can happen along the way. Which makes me think that maybe... if Christ is not through saving us yet... maybe we can hear all these hard things he said LESS as an ultimatum and MORE as an invitation to set our face toward Jerusalem and walk with him. LESS as: "Do this right now or else!" and MORE as: "Come, walk beside me as I do what I am called to do. Come, carry my cross with me... here, get underneath it with me... put your shoulder right here." NOT because I want you to suffer... I just want you to know that because of how the world is right now, you may. I want you to know how alive you can feel... even underneath something as heavy as his cross... I want you to know how free you can be when you get hold of your true purpose."

It is not for everyone – this life as his disciple. Jesus knows that... and that's what he's telling us. There are NOT a lot of people who have what it takes to shoulder the cross. But that does not mean the rest of us... the weaker ones... are lost. No, it is for the rest of us that he took its full weight upon himself... and if we cannot help him carry it, he will carry IT and US too. He just wants us to know how much it costs... he just wants us to not take it for granted. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer after Sermon

Lord Jesus, we thank you this morning for your words – even when they are hard words.
You have shown us, God, what is right and just;
you have shown us what it means to love as you love...
to forgive as you forgive.
You have shown us what it means to give everything to this call,
to live lives of radical obedience, radical humility, radical love.
Now Lord, may we live our lives with such determination and focus
that we might find the courage to lay aside
the pleasures, comforts, and needs of our own lives
in order to give life to others—indeed, abundant life for all.
Capture our hearts and minds with a vision of your kingdom,
and inspire us to work tirelessly to bring it to be in this world.
God, you call us to be a part of your kingdom;
and you call us to lead others to it.
So hear us now as we pray for the coming of that kingdom,
in the words Jesus taught us long ago.
Our Father... Amen.