

Sermon, June 26, 2022

Today's gospel, from Luke 9, is about following Jesus. It says, "As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus then explains just what kind of commitment he is looking for when you commit to following him.

What does it mean to follow?

Following means to move behind someone or something and to go where they go. It seems pretty straightforward. Here, Jesus implies absolute submission and attachment.

What is Jesus saying here?

Basically, Jesus is saying that he expects the commitment to follow him to surpass any other loyalties you might have in the world. The followers must be completely detached from material possessions and other relationships, as Jesus is. Following is more important than carrying out family duties, maintaining a home, or even explaining to your family members your decision to leave.

How have people followed in the past?

Sometimes it seems that God was very clear. In the wilderness, God guides the people by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night. Israel accepts the call and follows.

In the NT, follow me, is one of the first things you hear Jesus say as he starts his ministry. He calls to James and John, Matthew, Simon and Andrew. Throughout the gospel, the call to follow expands and becomes broader. He includes the lame, the demonics, the tax collectors, women and children.

Did these people always follow faithfully?

Lord, no. People are called, they commit to follow God, they follow for a while, and then they go astray. Sometimes God punishes them. Then God takes them back again. This pattern repeats itself again and again. It starts with Adam and Eve. There are the Israelites wandering thru the wilderness. Think of Jonah. Jonah ran away when God told him to go and preach. (That's how he ended up in the belly of the whale). Think of Elijah, the great prophet. Elijah ran when he was threatened by Jezebel and prayed that God might kill him. Think of the kings. God, at the insistence of the people, appointed kings to rule over these people. Some kings followed God, but many did what was wrong in the sight of the Lord.

Has anyone ever really followed loyally?

Only a few. Jesus did, but of course he had the advantage of being not only fully human, but also fully God. Caleb, a little known Israelite who followed God thru the wilderness, inherited the Promised Land 'because he followed the Lord wholeheartedly.'

King David was a figure that followed the Lord greatly, but even he got off track at times, i.e.: think of the scandal with Bathsheba.

There was also Melchizedek, both a king and a priest of God. In Hebrews 7 it says of him “Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.”

But the answer to the question about following Jesus completely is pretty much ‘no’.

The disciples probably had little idea of what they were getting into when they committed to follow. They grew into it more deeply as they began to understand his ways. The secrets of Jesus’s mission and the mystery of his life were disclosed only gradually.

Now journeys, by definition, have a destination.

Where is Jesus leading us on this journey?

At one point in John, Jesus says to his followers “You know the way to the place where I am going.” But Thomas answers “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

I think that gives us an idea. This journey is meant to take us to God, into the ‘kingdom of God’, or into the ‘reign of God’. Yet, that is a pretty illusive answer. I think to try to understand the kingdom of God, you have to look at the broad picture. Jesus tries to lead us to a kingdom where humans are liberated from the power of evil. A place where possessed people are freed from their demons. A place where the poor are restored to dignity. The reign of God is about liberation for anyone deprived of a full and happy life. It’s a place that is not based on judgement and wrath, but Jesus leads us to his father, full of overflowing love. The love of God comes without boundaries. Healing, liberating from evil, lifting people from worry and depression, reprimanding religious leaders and building a more friendly society were all paths toward the reign of God. It is truly good news for us.

Jesus tells us that this kingdom is among us now. And there are times when we can see signs of it, where evil is being overcome by God. Yet, at the same time that the kingdom is among us now, this kingdom is not fulfilled completely. We can also see signs of that.

What is our part in this kingdom?

Sometimes I think that it might be easier to take part in the kingdom, if I had a big pillar of fire to follow thru the wilderness, or a person calling me by name and bidding me to follow him. Yet, our job today, is to recognize God’s work in this mysterious and illusive kingdom and then help God in what he is doing. That is how we can help usher in the kingdom - by helping God.

In that effort, we need to remember that Jesus came first to the poorest, the most defenseless and the most humiliated. God’s love is for all his creation, but God takes the side of the poor because they suffer so unjustly. This is God’s justice. There are times, when we ourselves rank among the

needy. Certainly, in our spiritual lives we have great needs. But if we are truly to help God, then we also must take the side of the most needy.

It requires commitment. There comes a time in each one's journey when it is necessary clearly and unequivocally to declare the depth of that commitment. It cannot be a part-time or momentary commitment. It is a life-changing shift in direction and priorities. And even when we commit fully, we will sometimes fail. But I believe that God knows that we try.

Luke's story makes it unmistakably clear that following Jesus does not entail the comforts we prefer, does not dwell on the past, can disrupt fixed priorities, and offers only a vague notion of any destination. However, for us today, I don't think that the Christian journey demands that we reject our responsibilities to family and vocation, but rather, it encourages us to see those needs thru the eyes of Christ, shifting our perceptions.

In the book, *The New Neighbors*, by Sarah McIntyre, bunnies learn that rats are moving into the building. They are so excited and cannot wait to meet their new neighbors. On the way to greet the rats, the bunnies stop along the way and invite all the residents to join them. There's a sheep, two pigs, polar bears, a couple of yaks, and Granny Goat. Each of these residents brings hesitations and worries about the new neighbors just because they are rats. Rats, they say - Big, Dirty, Smelly, Thieving and Dangerous. But when the rats open the door, they are greeted with love and kindness as the rats have prepared a cake for all the new neighbors. Everyone's perception shifts. Just as when we begin to live in the kingdom of God, we are changed to see the world thru the eyes of God.

Today's readings ask much of us. Today's readings take us beyond the ordinary and ask us to launch out in new directions of faithfulness to God. They ask us to awaken to higher levels of reality and believe great things. They challenge us to trust God's presence working creatively and redemptively in us. They ask us to live by the spirit and to expect great things from ourselves as well as God.

So, the question to take home and ponder is, does the grace, mercy, and love of God shape our lives, or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we've already planned?