

Surrender

Luke 9:51-62

February 17, 2013

Jesus doesn't make it easy, does he? What if we took his approach?

Inquirer #1: I would really like to join your church!

Minister: That's fine, but I can't tell you where we will be or when we will meet. You will need to be ready at any time of the day or night. We might be under a bridge in Waterloo, or on a city street in Chicago's south side, or in an AIDS clinic in Port au Prince, in Haiti.

Minister: Sarah, join us!

Inquirer #2: I do want to be a part of what you are doing and I will join you, right after I get back from my grandmother's funeral in Indiana.

Minister: Other people can bury your grandmother. Your job is the kingdom of God! Get to it!

Inquirer #3: I'm ready to join this church! I'll just need to let my friends know where I'll be on Sunday mornings.

Minister: We are glad to have you join us, but if you are going to keep thinking about your friends, you are of no use to us or to the kingdom of God.

You think that would fill the pews? What was Jesus thinking?

Before everything else, above everything else, we are followers of Jesus. Agreed? But if we are following Jesus, where is Jesus going? Jesus is going to Jerusalem. And what is going to happen in Jerusalem?

If we follow Jesus, this is where we are going. This is what is going to happen. This is what we will face.

This is the context of Jesus' response to the three prospective followers. He is going to Jerusalem and he knows what awaits him there, and any who dare to come with him! His words are a warning and a challenge: "Come with me! But be sure you know what it means."

Jesus knows what is at stake. He knows what is at risk. He does his best to dissuade followers who may be eager, but unready to face the perils that lie ahead. He doesn't need companions who will cave in the face of threat or danger and run away or abandon him or deny him, which, of course, all of them did!

Following Jesus is serious business. It's not a hobby. And if following Jesus is a hobby, it means nothing. Our commitment to go where Jesus goes can't be one among a number of different commitments, one priority among a number of different priorities. It must be the only commitment. It must be the first priority. Because of who he is! And because of what his mission is -- the fate of this earth and its people is at stake!

Jesus' mission is not easy. It is perilous and hard. It requires courage and sacrifice and endurance, explicit obedience and uncompromised allegiance, and trust, utter trust. "Thy will be done!"

Sometimes the church really confuses the message. "Come to Jesus and you will have a cushy life!" We invite people to join us in following Jesus for the sake of what they will get out of it: healing, blessing, solutions to their problems, freedom from their demons, eternal life. You may well receive from Jesus any and all of these things, but this is not Jesus' motive in inviting you to follow. It's not: "Come to me and you will have a cushy life."

No, come to Jesus and your life will get harder!

To all the things about which you didn't give a second thought, you will give a second thought, and more.

Any decision -- moral or ethical or political or relational -- will be more complicated, because Jesus will be a part of all of them, your first priority in all of them.

You will no more be going with the flow, but swimming upstream.

You may make new friends, but will surely make new enemies.

No more will you be able to look away from a suffering neighbor in good conscience or make it through even one day untroubled by the devastating consequences of sin and injustice, of your own sins and of the injustices which permeate every society, every nation.

Your work and your time and your money and your resources -- and your self -- will no longer be your own, but Jesus will have first claim on them all. Maybe that's the hardest thing of all, that your life will no more be about what you want. Something else comes first. Someone else comes first.

You have probably heard people talk this last week about the things they are giving up for Lent. Maybe you too have given some thought to what you might give up for Lent. I have not, because giving things up for Lent was never part of my tradition and still is not part of my spiritual practice.

Such commitments are surely commendable. They are a form of spiritual discipline, a way to refocus attention and to clear space for God. But self-deprivation by itself has no inherent spiritual value. Fasting should lead to prayer. Doing without means nothing if it is not accompanied by doing with, by filling your life instead with something of more value and more importance. That's why I've often encouraged people not to give up something for Lent, but to add something: prayer or Bible study or gathering for worship on a Wednesday evening or undertaking a service project.

But this year, I do want to talk with you about giving things up for Lent. Not sweets or caffeine or meat or television or your cell phone. No, things much harder to give up, things with which we are so much more invested and entangled.

We begin today with perhaps the hardest thing of all to give up: control. This is where following Jesus begins, with giving up control. Your life is not your own. Or, more accurately, your life will not be your own until you give it away. You will never be truly free until you say, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

In this life, victory begins with surrender.

But why? Why do it? Why surrender? Why follow Jesus if it will only make your life more complicated, more difficult, even more dangerous?

You tell me. What do you find more compelling ...

... a life of your own, a cushy and blissfully unengaged life?

... or a life following Jesus, a life pointed toward a far horizon, its way difficult and dangerous and demanding, but its goal nothing less than the kingdom of God itself?