

“Follow Me: Priorities”

Series: Follow Me

Scripture: Luke 9:57-62

Rev. Pen Peery

January 26, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

This January in worship we've been preaching about different aspects of what it means to follow, or be a disciple of, Jesus.

Today we are talking about making that discipleship a priority. The Scripture is from the 9th chapter of Luke, and it is...well...you'll see.

Before we read it, let us go to God in prayer. Let us pray:

Challenge us with your word, O God. Because, sometimes, we admit we tend to want your call to us to be polite and easy and palatable...maybe even in ways that don't ask much of us or cause us to need to live differently than we are accustomed to living. By your Holy Spirit, give us open and willing hearts to hear the message you have for us today. We ask it in Jesus's name. Amen.

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As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And 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.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

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Do you know that famous picture of Jesus...I think it was painted in the 1940s or 50s. Jesus looks like he was born in Kansas instead of Palestine. And he has his head tilted back...those long locks flowing...with a huge smile on his face.

Do you know that picture?

Well, the person we meet in today's Scripture is not that Jesus.

The Jesus in today's Scripture is ornery. He's frustrated. He's cranky.

I've got three middle schoolers under my roof at home. I can attest to the fact that – sometimes – people just wake up in a mood.

Yes – it seems that Jesus was having a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day.

"I will follow you wherever you go, Jesus..."

"Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

"I will follow you, but first let me bury my father..."

"Let the dead bury their own dead..."

"I will follow you, but first let me say farewell to those at my home..."

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“No one who puts their hand to the plough and looks back if fit for the kingdom of God.”

Yikes! Take a deep breath, Jesus!

You sure do take this discipleship thing seriously!

I don't know much about foxes and birds, or about the dead burying their dead – but there is something in Jesus's temper tantrum that helps me, perhaps, understand his frustration.

Have you ever put your hand to a plough?

The first (and only) time I did was when I was 22 years old. I was in between college and graduate school – and an elderly friend of my parents' asked me to help him on his farm, presumably because of my young and limber back.

I imagined it would be like a Faulkner novel...I'd be the Gentleman Farmer, using the sweat of my brow to shape the land into what it needed to be in order to grow crops aplenty.

The reality was...different. My parents' friend was a man named Neil. He was 55 years my senior. Neil and his wife had a house with a farm in Madison County, North Carolina, just north of Asheville. We were going to plant peas, but first we had to till the ground.

Neil told me to watch him till one row so that I could get the “hang of it.” He fired up the gas-powered plough (different from the mule-powered plough that Jesus likely referenced, but still...). I could tell it was tedious work, but after watching Neil dig about 30 feet of a straight line trench in the Western North Carolina dirt, I felt confident in my ability to try. After all, Neil was pushing 80. I was in my prime.

Do you know it's hard to plough in a straight line?

It takes concentration. Focus. Strength. Patience. Practice.

The first row I ploughed looked like a squiggle. The second row looked the same.

Neil just smiled at me – then told me he would finish the other rows while I took a break until it was time to plant seeds.

If you want to plough effectively, you've got to make it the number one thing. You don't do it halfway. You don't look back, or to the side, or down...you look forward; you make sure to see where you are going to go, not where you have been.

Just before I started reading today's passage, Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus had “set his face toward Jerusalem.” In Bible-talk, what that means is that Jesus knew it was time for him to begin to shift his focus to the long and painful journey he would make to the cross.

You can imagine, can't you, that making that mental shift...from being a beloved teacher, and worker or miracles, who the crowds adored and the disciples gladly followed...to willingly going to the place where he knew he would find conflict, and rejection, and ridicule, and...even...death...you can imagine that, for Jesus, he might have felt that it was no longer time for his followers to be **kind-of** committed. That it was no longer

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time for his disciples to be lukewarm in their decision. Now, it was time for people to mean it – to give following Jesus the priority that at least *attempted* to match the kind of commitment that he was giving the cause.

You can understand, can't you, that Jesus might be a little short...a little ornery...a little frustrated?

No one who looks back is worthy...

Let the dead bury their own dead...

Urgency creates intensity...and intensity that Jesus seems to want us to share.

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As I wrestled with the text this week thinking about what to preach this morning I had a realization: I've always assumed that these three nameless almost-disciples in the story had **valid** excuses and that it was **Jesus** who was being unreasonable.

That is to say, I realize that I've got sympathy for the excuses and delays and, maybe, a little...contempt? for the brazen way that Jesus demands discipleship anyway.

And perhaps that's telling.

Because while it may be true that those three almost-disciples **did** have valid excuses or requests – I guess I always find myself wishing that Jesus would have acquiesced...maybe yielded...accommodated to their need...which, in a way, would legitimate my own excuses when it comes to making discipleship a priority.

Real talk?

I don't know what excuses you might have – deep down – for not making following Jesus your priority. For me, if I'm really being honest, they break down into two categories:
First – sometimes I find I lack courage. There are things that those of us who follow Jesus need to say, choices we need to make (and not make), times we need to stand up, and times we need to stand with those who our culture doesn't always value and honor. Sometimes, when we do that, there is a cost. And sometimes, I admit, I weigh that cost and choose a path that is easier.

Second – sometimes I get discouraged. A big part of following Jesus is believing that that God's promises can be trusted. That hope can be realized. That justice and peace and wholeness are the at the end of our story. And then you look at the world...and you get overwhelmed by the brokenness...and you wonder what is really more powerful: the brokenness or the promises?

I don't always feed those two excuses.

Most of the time I push through those nagging thoughts and get on with the business of doing the best I can in my life and in my work to be a disciple. But, every once in a while, I admit that there are times when I take my hand off the plough...when I hesitate to fully commit...and when I relativize my call to follow Jesus as one of the **many** things that occupy my time and make me who I am.

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And when those moments come, I am grateful that being a Christian...and a follower of Jesus...isn't an individual endeavor, but one that we get to do in the company and community of the Church of Jesus Christ.

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When I need to re-focus my priorities when it comes to discipleship, I find what helps the most is witnessing the testimony of others who have done it well.

It's not too often that a sermon makes the news, but this week it was certainly the case. Last Tuesday, the day after his inauguration, President Trump attended a worship service at the National Cathedral in Washington where The Rev. Marianne Budde preached. You've probably heard or seen the clip that made the news and raised the hackles of just about everyone on every part of the political spectrum...some who were upset at what Bishop Budde said, and some who were upset about the response to what Bishop Budde said. Whatever you think about it, for the purpose of this sermon, I think what Bishop Budde did took courage. Take the party-politics out of it – to stand in the presence of *any* President...Democrat or Republican...and to be led by Scripture to plead for mercy on behalf of those who are vulnerable...to me, that is an example of prioritizing the call to follow Jesus even in the presence of power. Because – beyond politics and policies – Christ calls us to see the image of God in one another.

Remember my friend, Neil...the farmer?

What I didn't tell you about Neil is that – in a former life, he had been a pastor. And through pastoring churches in the South in the 1960s through the Civil Rights Movement he bumped into some stuff. Some of the things he did...some of the things he said in his church made some people angry...angry enough to cause him to lose his job. Neil found a career outside of being a pastor, but he stayed committed to being involved in the church. Even though the church had disappointed him, he didn't allow himself to get discouraged. He stayed focused on where God was calling the church to be the hands and feet of Jesus in the world.

One of the ways Neil exercised that commitment was by volunteering with a group of church volunteers at Habitat for Humanity. For decades – even up into his early 90s, you could find Neil with his hammer, hard-hat, and a goofy grin at the Habitat job site every Friday morning...diligently working help achieve the dream of giving everyone afford the dignity of owning a house they could call a home.

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The call to follow Jesus isn't always easy.

And – like it or not – the invitation to do so doesn't ask us to go halfway.

It takes concentration. Focus. Strength. Patience. Practice.

Will we...sometimes look back? Of course.

And when we do – there will be other disciples who can help us regain our attention.

Because it is worth it, my friends.

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The future that God promises all of us is worth it as evidenced by the love and grace that claim us as God's own.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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