

Follow Me
Luke 9:51-62
June 27, 2010

I.

Jesus did not seem to be in a very good mood today, did he? What was happening here? We frequently hear uplifting and encouraging readings on Sundays. They are stories that tell us Jesus is preparing a home for us, or that we should not worry about our lives, or that faith can calm the storms that beset us, or that we always can be forgiven.

Many parts of the Gospels are comforting and give us peace. But today's reading is demanding and gives us pause. Today Jesus called us to attention, and gave us marching orders for Christian living. Sometimes we would prefer not to hear such harsh words. Readings like this might remind us of when we were in school and someone scraped their fingernails on the blackboard.

Or we might want to treat Jesus' words like a tough piece of meat we first must tenderize. We might not want to think that our Lord and Savior would respond to people the way that he did.

But he did say what he said. And we are called to understand and follow his teachings. We don't have the option of tenderizing the Bible, or picking and choosing which parts we can accept and which parts we can disregard. Faith is not a consumer item that we can assemble to suit our own tastes or preferences. Truth is truth, whether we agree with it or not.

I'm reminded of the Actor Kevin Costner, who played a golfer in the movie *Tin Cup*. And apparently Mr. Costner at one time also owned a golf course. And as he was taking a friend on a tour, he said, "The best part of owning a golf course is I can decide what par is for each hole." Then, pointing to a green, he said, "See that hole there. It's a par 12. Yesterday I birdied it."

And that's fine when we own the course and can make the rules. But when we use real scores on real courses with real rules, then we have to concentrate and work to improve our games. That's also the case with our faith. We have to work at it. It is not so easy that a caveman could do it.

Therein lies the message for today in the Gospel. Jesus told us that being called to discipleship means we cannot hesitate, or look back, or put other things first. We cannot put conditions on our discipleship. When Jesus calls, the answer is "Yes." It is not "Yes, but."

II.

With that, let's look at this reading. It described an important turning point in Jesus' ministry. Before this time he and the disciples had been traveling around Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing the sick. It was a time of excitement and hope and miracles and adoring crowds.

Today Jesus began to turn away from all that and, in the words of the Gospel, he "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus now knew that the next and final phase of his ministry was at hand. The emphasis had begun to shift from the crowds to his disciples, and to his own destiny. This was the start of his fateful journey south to Jerusalem, and to the cross. The enormity of what was ahead had begun to weigh upon him.

And just as the Gospel shows Jesus' own determination and commitment as he embarked on this last part of his earthly ministry, it also shows the determination and commitment that he expected from his disciples as they accompanied him.

We heard his expectations in his responses to three people who wanted to follow him. In effect, they had done the first century equivalent of putting in an application. They told Jesus they wanted the job. They wanted to go to work for him. The Gospel describes part of the interview.

But Jesus did not respond like many employers might do today, did he? Based only on today's reading we might not want him to be in charge of our personnel department. Employers normally talk about why their companies are good places to work. Jesus did not do that. He said some hard things. He emphasized the disadvantages rather than the opportunities of following him.

And this was because things were changing. Jesus now was well-known and visible, with a radical new message. His enemies soon would plot to kill him. It was going to be a more dangerous time and Jesus wanted those with him to know that. He was interested in believers, not groupies.

III.

This is apparent in what Jesus said to the three people who approached him. He told the first that while even birds and animals had homes, the Son of Man had no place to rest his head. The reality was that anyone who followed him to Jerusalem basically would be homeless.

The second person's story can be troubling, and I will go into it in more detail. When Jesus said to follow him, the fellow replied that he first wanted to go and bury his father. Jesus, however, was not at all sympathetic, and said to let the dead bury their own dead. Then he told the fellow to go and proclaim the coming of the kingdom.

Well, this sounds brusque and unkind, doesn't it? Perhaps it was because of the circumstances in which Jesus found himself. He used strong words to make a strong point. He didn't want his disciples to be distracted by other things, even family matters.

There is, however, another theory advanced by some theologians and biblical scholars who have speculated about the context of Jesus' words. They point out the early Jewish tradition where sons followed their fathers into the family business and worked there until the fathers died. Then the sons were free to continue the business or sell it and do something else. And, according to these scholars, the tradition sometimes was referred to as "burying my father."

As a result, these scholars speculate that this young man's father was not yet dead but was living, and the man was telling Jesus that he still needed to work in the family business as long as his father was alive. Then, apparently, after the father actually died he would become a disciple.

And this theory is given some credibility by Jewish law at the time that required people to be buried by the first sundown after they died. So if this man's father actually was dead it could have been likely that the man would have been busy grieving and making burial arrangements rather than hanging around with Jesus and thinking about discipleship.

I don't know if this theory is true. Perhaps it's just a fanciful idea. But there is some plausibility to the suggestion that the man's father was not literally dead, and Jesus knew it. In any event, however, the point of the story is Jesus' response. He told the man that responsibilities of discipleship would not wait, and cannot be limited by other things he might want to do.

The story of the third man who wanted to follow Jesus after he went home and said farewell to his family also is a difficult teaching. Jesus did not respond directly but rather with a metaphor about how the man could not put a hand to the plow and then look back.

Again the message comes through, doesn't it? Jesus did not specifically tell him he could not first go home, but warned him that once he became a disciple there could be no turning back.

IV.

So, what does this Gospel mean in our daily lives? Can we live up to the standards that Jesus expects, or are those standards just for some people but not for everyone?

We can understand today's reading from two perspectives. First, it now is two thousand years later. Christianity has been established. But most people are not asked to give up their jobs, or leave their families, or sell their homes in the name of Christianity. Our Lord and Savior wants us to live full, happy, and productive lives in society.

Even so, we still are called to faith and belief just as were those who lived in Jesus' time on earth. That has not changed. Now, as then, he wants our commitment to him to be our first priority, all the time and not just when convenient.

And so it's not like we can be scheduled to play golf in the morning, have lunch at noon, and then follow Jesus in the afternoon before we meet friends for dinner in the evening. It doesn't work that way. Jesus wants us to be his disciples all day, every day.

That means we are Christians and witnesses to Jesus on the golf course, in the restaurant at lunch, and in the homes of others. There is no "off-on" switch for being a disciple. And there is no timer you can set to alert you to "discipleship time." Discipleship time is all the time.

The second perspective for discipleship focuses on the church, which people of Jesus' time did not have. Certainly, Jesus' disciples prayed and worshipped, but the church, as the Body of Christ, arose later. Jesus left the church behind so we could be his disciples together, in community.

But the larger church has not always put its best foot forward. It has made compromises in misguided attempts to emphasize its relevance in society rather than its adherence to the Word. Its priorities are becoming less holy and more secular, which is jeopardizing its role as a leader in society and transforming it into a follower.

It therefore is up to us to call the church back to Scripture and turn it away from practices that never were envisioned by the early disciples. Restoring the church's commitment to the truth also is the work of discipleship for us.

And the point is that even though we are called to be disciples as individuals, we also are called to be disciples together in community. Today's gospel proclaims we cannot be half-hearted about it, either for ourselves or for our church. We cannot put it off until later, and we cannot just fit it into a convenient place in our own agendas. Following Jesus means just that; following Jesus.

V.

So, being a disciple can be hard. We can be taken out of our comfort zones. Jesus asks us to do some things that do not come naturally. He certainly does not ask us to do only those things we would do anyway. He tells us that through faith we are to put things at the top of our lists that, without faith, might be closer to the bottom. But he also tells us that he will enable us do whatever he calls us to do.

And at the heart of the call to discipleship is believing and living God's word as the Bible proclaims it and as the Holy Spirit reveals it. This is not something we do on our own terms, but on God's terms, knowing there might be costs in this world, but eternal rewards in the world to come.

And St. Thomas is here to help us. Here, in community with others, we can be faithful to our Lord and Savior. Together, as we follow him, we can find peace, comfort, and support. And equally important, together as the community of St. Thomas, we can be witnesses to help build up the church in the world to be what our Lord and Savior intended it to be. *Amen.*