

Jesus on a Mission

Isaiah 50:4-9 Luke 9:46-62

As we journey with Jesus through Luke's gospel, we come to a section (9 through 19) that has been called the Samaritan journey. Beginning with this morning's passage, Jesus travels through Samaritan country, which was considered enemy territory. Jews and Samaritans didn't associate with each other and occasionally engaged in violent skirmishes, in God's name. Like today in the Middle East!

Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, the Jewish capitol, and he knew what would await him there, and what his purpose was in going to Jerusalem: he predicts his death twice just before this section, and repeats it again toward the end of this section. So, Jesus is on a mission, and he is inviting his followers to journey with him. This is a journey that will take them through uncertain and uncomfortable territory (Samaritan country) and it will involve a new level of trust and commitment.

As Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem he is going to teach and model for his disciples what servanthood and sacrifice looks like. And it begins with a teachable moment...

Luke 9:46-62

⁴⁶ An argument arose among the disciples as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

⁴⁹ John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." ⁵⁰ But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem (*ethnic, religious and ideological tension*). ⁵⁴ When 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?" (*You gotta love James and John. We learn from the gospels that their nickname is "sons of thunder" and you can see why. But it reveals the mindset: let's torch 'em! Bomb 'em!*) ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then they went on to another village. (*I wish Luke would've recorded Jesus' rebuke; Jesus had some choice words for them I'm sure. I imagine Jesus saying, "Do you really want to use the gifts God has given you to destroy someone who doesn't receive you or receive what you have to offer?" And I love it that Jesus just moves on to another village; he doesn't fuss over the people who don't receive him; he just moves on. There is a great lesson in here in choosing your battles, and not wasting time and energy on some people or situations*).

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ 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.” ⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰ But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹ Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

This is the word of the Lord.

In the classic movie, *The Blues Brothers* (hard to believe it was made over 40 years ago), the main story is about two brothers (played by John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd) who are released from prison and try to reassemble their R&B band so they can raise money to save the Catholic home where they were raised. They have good intentions, but they wreak havoc on the city of Chicago as they hunt down their former band members and practically coerce them into rejoining the band. The memorable line from the movie is: “We’re on a mission from God...”

It's a comical, silly, and tragic story of these two brothers going from place to place to place, finding their old band members and getting them to come on board with playing together once again so they can save a Catholic foster home. And although it's a good example of a bad example, they are 100% committed to what they're doing. “We’re on a mission from God” is what they say everywhere they go.

And that could be Jesus' line, especially in this part of Luke's gospel. Jesus was on a mission from God: he knew exactly what his purpose was. As Luke tells us: Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. Message: "...he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem." That captures his resolve and the emotion of the journey and the destination. Much like the words of God's servant from Isaiah: "I have set my face like flint; the One who vindicates me is nearby." I love Jesus' resolve. He set his face like flint to accomplish God's purpose for him; his primary mission. Along with that *primary* personal mission, is his mission of calling people to follow him; calling people to journey with him, to continue the learning, the discipleship, that will bring the good news of the Kingdom.

As we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem in this section of Luke's gospel, this introductory passage from Luke presents teachable moments. Presented by the disciples first, and then 3 would-be followers.

The overarching theme is: following Jesus isn't always what we think it will be, or should be; it will present challenges, and opportunities, and a new way of thinking about ourselves, about others, and about how Jesus does what he does.

So, what are the opportunities and challenges presented to the disciples, and to us, on this journey? What change of mind is required? What new resolve

is asked of us as we are invited to follow Jesus? In our text for this morning, I see three examples of misperceptions, or misunderstandings, of what following Jesus means, and then Jesus' reframing, and clarifying what it truly means.

The first misunderstanding/misconception is:

1. Triumphalism. We see this in the argument about who is the greatest, and we see it in the sons of thunder wanting to carpet bomb the Samaritans.

This example of misunderstanding sees Jesus as the triumphal leader, the conquering hero who holds to a hierarchical view of heaven and earth, and therefore of leadership. It reveals a view of authority where power is exercised to dispense of perceived enemies with fiery methods.

Jesus reframes and clarifies this by presenting a child as the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven in the first instance, and by speaking some words of clarification for James and John in the second, and moving on so they can focus on their mission.

There is a lot of ego at play here, isn't there? And again, Jesus is going to teach and model for them—during this journey toward Jerusalem—a better use of ego. Where we don't seek fanfare, or fire, or control, or power, but where we exercise servanthood and self-reflection, and turn our attention to those in need and those on the margins who are hurting and helpless. This isn't about ego

deflation or ego destruction, but ego *integration*. The disciples reflected a kind of *ego inflation*. Jesus wants to take that energy and redirect it, so it is *integrated* with his mission and purposes. And this will require lessons in humility along the way; and an occasional *humiliation*, as we'll see. We've all been there, right?

This Samaritan journey section *begins* with learning about humility. And it is *bookended* in Luke 19:10, after an evening with Zacchaeus, when Jesus says, "The son of man came to seek and to save the lost." That could be considered Jesus' personal mission statement and a summary of everything that is said and done leading up to it.

"The son of man came to seek and to save the lost." Jesus makes that statement on the eve of Palm Sunday, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And even that "triumphal" entry is an example of humility as Jesus rides into Jerusalem, not on a war horse, but on a donkey.

So, triumphalism is addressed here as one common misunderstanding of discipleship. Another misunderstanding revealed here is:

2. An us vs. them mentality. Which is manifest in the statement that... "*Someone is doing ministry apart from us, the true circle of followers, and we tried to stop them.*"

“They aren’t part of our group!” you can hear him say. The subtext: “How can they possibly be doing it right if they aren’t part of us?” “Those... other Presbyterians across town...” “Those _____” (charismatics, those Catholics...). Jesus responds to this competitive spirit with the affirmation that “we’re all on the same team here, if we’re doing good work.” He’s saying, there are enough enemies already; we don’t need to create new ones where there really isn’t anything to be concerned about. If you’re working toward the same goal, you’re already on each other’s side.

The disciples will have to learn that the Kingdom will go forward through people they don’t know, who aren’t part of their group. And we, likewise, are encouraged to learn to celebrate all the ways that God is at work through all kinds of people. People who do things differently than we do, or have different ideas.

It seems to be human nature that we reflexively sort ourselves out by who is *not* like me, or us. And Jesus is trying to get his followers to work new muscles, to have new reflexes, with regard to others. Where we look with appreciative eyes, for what unites us and not what *appears* to separate. This is what Jesus prayed for in John 17, the night before his death: unity among believers.

Yes, we need to exercise good judgment and be wise and wary at appropriate times—like being wary of triumphalism, which is very much at play right now in

our country by some Christian nationalist leaders. We need to be wise, but in the big picture of things Jesus is trying to equip his followers with new vision, to see others with appreciative eyes, not with reflexively critical or competitive eyes.

In our world today, even years before covid, we have seen the emergence of a kind of tribalism. Are you familiar with that word, that phenomenon? Tribalism. Of people sorting themselves into ideological camps and religious camps and tribes, deciding who's in and who's out, who's friend and who's foe, who's right and who is wrong. Who is on *our* side and who isn't. Who belongs in our tribe and who doesn't. This has all been magnified in the last few years. And much of modern tribalism, like ancient tribalism, is built around a group having a common enemy. We heard Jesus teach an anti-tribalism a few weeks ago when he said, "Love your enemies." It's okay for us to still have our groups, people we like to hang out with, as long as we don't vilify others.

Jesus is saying, make friends, love others, and work together. There is enough us vs. them going on in the world.

The last misunderstanding that Jesus addresses and reframes and clarifies:

3. The desire for easy discipleship. If the first misunderstanding is of discipleship as triumphalism, this misunderstanding is of discipleship as a journey of ease and convenience. It would be like someone showing up to enlist in the army

saying, "I heard the food is good and the beds are comfortable." Um, I think you are not rightly informed about what is involved here.

And that's the misunderstanding of the three would-be followers.

First, a very earnest person says "I will follow you wherever you go!" What great intentions! "This'll be fun!" Jesus replies, "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head." In other words, you will be following a homeless messiah. We're going to be itinerating from place to place and relying on the hospitality of strangers.

The other two would-be followers have similar responses to Jesus: they want to go home and take care of some family business first. Both of their responses contain figures of speech, common to the middle east.

The first says "Let me bury my father," which is a traditional figure of speech that refers specifically to the duty of the son to remain near home or at home and care for his aging parents until they have passed. It didn't mean his father had died, but that the son was feeling the tug of cultural custom to remain near home until he felt released from his family obligations.

An old friend from China told me that they have a similar custom, and a traditional Chinese saying, which translates to "While one's parents are alive, do not travel far away." Or if you must travel, you should have a specific destination

and keep your parents informed. That doesn't happen in American culture, does it? But it's part of many ancient cultures around the world.

The next earnest would-be follower says to Jesus, "First let me say farewell to those at home." Again, this doesn't mean, "I want to go home and give my family hugs and kisses before I leave." In the culture of the Middle East it means, "Let me go home and *ask permission* to leave." Biblical commentators from the Middle East translate the phrase this way: "Let me explain my case to those in my house." Again, a child who wanted to leave home typically must be granted permission from his or her parents.

And to each of them, Jesus says they'll need to make a decision. *And*, there is a sense of urgency in the invitation; he is saying to them: this isn't about you setting the timeline at your convenience. God is calling you, now. What will you decide?

Notice, though, that Jesus did not coerce them in any way, or threaten them with consequences (the way the Blues Brothers did on their mission from God). Jesus is simply and directly telling them, this isn't about convenience; there will be challenge and choice. It's up to you to decide. It will be a blessed life, though, because we're on a mission! To proclaim the Kingdom of God.

In pulling all of this together for us, today, I think it's safe to say that we, collectively, are journeying into the unknown, the uneasy, and the uncomfortable.

And part of *our* discipleship will require us to learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Taking time to take care of ourselves and others, of course, finding experiences of joy and rest; and at the same time making the decision, perhaps on a daily basis, to become willing to follow Jesus into the unknown. Looking forward, not backward, as Jesus says. The striking line at the end, the exclamation point if you will, is Jesus' line about putting a hand to the plow and not looking back, but keeping our vision forward. What Jesus is telling us is that the Kingdom of God, and Kingdom work, are forward-focused. We are people of the Way, and the Way is always ahead/forward.

If we are going to have a truly positive future, the temptation will present itself to want to return to what used to be (to want to go back—personally, societally, and even in the church). Like God's people leaving Egypt, who consistently wanted to go back. God was leading them forward, and the way forward for them indeed presented challenges in the wilderness, but it also presented opportunities to trust God in new ways, to walk in faith, and in new life. Even if it was uncomfortable for a time. Like them, and like the characters in our passage this morning, we need to confront the temptation to go back with a decision to follow Jesus in the Way, the Kingdom Way, which is forward.

Things have changed, and will continue to change. *We* have changed! Even if we aren't always aware of it. So amidst the change, we are invited to learn to trust God anew as Jesus leads us forward, with opportunities to serve and love and bless others along the way.

Take My Life and Let it Be Consecrated