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David L. Edwards

The Call to Discipleship

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus' days are running out and he has "set his face toward Jerusalem." These words have a sober and serious tone. Jesus is making the final turn toward the completion of his ministry and his life. In the holy city of God he will confront the religious and political power structure. Had Jesus been only a wise teacher, giving us important things to ponder, this would not be such a big thing. Had Jesus been only a miraculous healer, he could be dismissed or embraced with no real harm. But Jesus lived his life fully under the claim of God and called others to the same. It is the call to center our lives in God and to live from that center and nothing else. Only such a life can bring something truly life-giving to a world so hurt and lost. Only by reordering our lives around God and God's call to new life can we know the true and deepest meaning, purposes, and joy of life. But such a realignment of our lives, such a total commitment brings us into conflict with dimensions of human life, within us and around us, that are given to self-centeredness, the desire for power and prestige, and the many illusions that bring misery and suffering to our own lives and our life as a human family.

In the first part of our reading Jesus and his disciples are shunned by a Samaritan town. Jesus had been compassionate and charitable toward Samaritans. A Samaritan was the hero of one of his greatest parables. But Samaritans and Jews were like Palestinians and Jews of today, or Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or any groups with deep historic hatred of one another. The Samaritans see Jesus going to Jerusalem and don't want anything to do with him. The disciples get defensive and want to call down fire from heaven to destroy these people. Jesus rebukes them. We don't know what he said to them, but it may have been something like, "Look, we've got a job to do, a calling to fulfill. We don't have time and energy to worry about everyone who doesn't understand us or take our side." Jesus showed no interest in punishing folks who didn't follow him or agree with him. He was completely focused on what he was called to do. And he teaches us to do the same.

The call to discipleship is the call to discover and devote ourselves completely to what Christ calls us to do. If we get side-tracked by our need for others to agree with us or give their approval, then we never get around to what we are called to do with our own lives. It

seems so easy for us to take defensive postures, spending our time and energy criticizing others who don't do things our way or think as we do. Jesus shows us the way of having confidence in what we feel God has called us to do with our own lives and to be about it with focus, and without malice toward others or turning them into enemies. In the end, we have only our own lives to answer for and to live in the most fruitful way possible. That's what we need to be about, with humility and commitment.

Next come three vignettes on discipleship. Someone calls out to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." This anonymous person represents those who initiate discipleship to Jesus. We see something of what Jesus is about and feel drawn to it and want to be part of it. This may be the voice of spiritual enthusiasm, a rush of excitement about this new life Jesus talks about. Maybe it is the voice of one who is impressed by the ethical teachings of Jesus—peace, justice, compassion, love, self-giving. Maybe it is the voice of someone who just wants to be part of something meaningful, to fill an emptiness, to join up with a group that seems to have it together spiritually.

Whatever motivates this voice, Jesus throws cold water on it. He responds with a dose of reality, how it's going to be if we join up with him: "Foxes and birds have places to call home, places of rest and protection; but the Son of man has nowhere even to lay his head." Following Jesus means following one who is on a completely different journey in life, whose aim is not personal comfort or safety, whose life is driven by a spiritual restlessness and hunger, who knows that living out of a relationship with the living God means a kind of homelessness in the world, always in the process of transformation, of becoming, of letting go and being by the Spirit of God.

This offer we make to Jesus—"I will follow you"—is on our terms, not his. We offer our discipleship with conditions that make it palatable or convenient and don't necessitate our being changed people. When we make our offer of discipleship, we do it so that it fits into our lives, not so that our lives are completely overhauled and given over to Christ. We pray when we feel like it. We give a little time here and there to some good work, but not a complete commitment. We love others when it feels good and avoid those we have trouble with, who challenge us in some way. We want to be part of the community of faith as long as things go our way, and when they don't, we pack up our marbles. Reversing Saint Francis' prayer, we want to be understood but not to understand, to be loved but not to love. We want forgiveness for ourselves but hang onto grudges and demand punishment. The upshot is that we never get to the profound transformation that occurs in us when it

is not we who volunteer but Christ who calls us, who asks for our whole lives, our whole being.

This can happen even when we take on the disciplines of faith—prayer, giving, mission, love in community, and so forth. It can subtly change from Christ's call and claim over our whole lives to something we offer—a deadly doing of the law, keeping religious obligations rather than knowing Christ's claim on us and following him on his terms. The statement of membership in the Church of the Covenant, called "Our Covenant One with Another", has an important sequence. First is the recognition that when Christ calls us, he claims our whole lives. Our discipleship is in response to his call, not our volunteering. It is in response to that call of Christ to follow him that we then accept certain spiritual disciplines or practices that give a shape to our response in concrete terms. The disciplines are in part our discipleship, but they are more importantly the means by which we keep ourselves open to Christ's call every day of our lives. Once we begin thinking that it is our faithfulness or unfaithfulness to spiritual practices that comprises our discipleship, we are dead in the water spiritually. We've veered off the road of following Christ and landed in a ditch. Discipleship is not our offer to Jesus; it is his offer to us.

Then Jesus does call someone: "Follow me." It's always that concise, always that simple, always that demanding of our total being. Just come with me. Follow behind me. See what I'm up to. Share my life and work. This person asks to be allowed first to go and bury his father. Wouldn't Jesus have some compassion here? Sure, go take care of things. Go and work through your grief and loss. Then come back and see me when you're ready. But that's not what Jesus says. "Let the dead bury the dead. I am calling you to go and proclaim with your life the kingdom of God." It sounds pretty abrupt and even heartless.

We all have the dead that we want to bury. We carry around stuff that's part of the past and we're still clinging to it or letting it cling to us. The hardest thing in the world seems to be living fully in the present, being fully alive and awake in the present moments of our lives. There are serious issues in our past. And there are just some things we keep gnawing on as though we can tie up every loose end and then we will be ready to live.

But Jesus has a different take on it. I'm calling you to a very large work, to put your life at the disposal God's kingdom, God's transformation of the whole world. This means leaving behind all of that stuff, or at least putting it in the broader, deeper perspective of what God is doing for all of creation. You can tinker around with the dead past if you want. You can let it keep you from living fully in the present if you want. You can hang onto the past and keep trying to repeat it in the

present if you want. But that's not going anywhere. And it's not following me. Jesus' call itself frees us from the hold of the past on us and awakens us to the present moment in which we meet the living God. Yes, we may always have struggles with things in our past and our desires to hang onto the past. But Jesus' call comes continually to us to break the chains of the past and to call us into freedom, to respond in the present and toward the future.

Finally, another person volunteers: "I will follow you, Lord, but let me say goodbye to everybody at home." Same thing as before. When we offer our discipleship, it is always on our terms, not Jesus'. It is conditional and does not bring us the fullness of life that comes from Christ's call that claims our total lives. This is somewhat the same as the other would-be disciple's response to Jesus' call. Now it's, first let me go say goodbye to my former life, to everyone back home. Let me tie up all the loose ends, pay off the mortgage, settle my accounts, make sure everyone understands what I'm doing and is okay with it. No, says Jesus. That's not the deal. The deal is that when you put your hand to the plough, you don't look back. If you do, you lose your direction. Instead of straight rows, you wander all over the place. This is single-minded discipleship to Christ. It is cultivating the spiritual capacity to let go of the disappointments, pains, and failures, even the successes and joys of the past in order to live faithfully each day and each moment of our lives. It is keeping our hands on the plough of faith in Christ and following Christ with the uniqueness of our own lives.

In our individual lives and our life as the Church of the Covenant, Jesus' call is sounded in the present moment and toward the future. It is on his terms, not ours. It is the call to live as those who already belong to that new reality, the kingdom of God, and proclaim it with our lives in all that we are and say and do. It is the call to be about discovering the answer to this most important question: What am I going to do with my life with whatever days or years I have ahead of me? It is the call to enter that kind of homelessness that Jesus spoke of to the first would-be disciple, to let go of all attachments inwardly and outwardly so that we are in touch with and led by God's Spirit. It is the call to live in the present moment toward the future, not always looking back over our shoulders. Our spiritual work is to be as present as possible, as awake and aware as we can be each day to hear Christ's call in our lives. And then to follow him with our whole being, using the gifts God has given us, to be the channels of God's redeeming love in the world. To respond to God's claim on our total lives and to remain focused on and committed to what we discern Christ is calling us to do is the most fulfilling way to make this journey that is our lives.