Third Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“Toward Jerusalem”* Luke 9:51-62

For most of us, the usual reaction we have to the passage we just heard is a wrinkle in the forehead, and maybe an expression of weariness. Some of us may even shake our heads in frustration. We do this because Jesus’ response to the three people he meets among his way to Jerusalem is…challenging.

As he meets each of them, he invites them to join him on the journey. Each time, the person appears to say “yes.” However, each of them has a little bit of business they have to take care of, and this proves to be a problem for Jesus.

Actually, the first one he says, “yes, do come along.” This man says he will come along with Jesus. He says he will go *wherever* Jesus goes…until he is told of what to expect in the way of accommodations.

*“Foxes have dens and birds have nests,” says Jesus, “but the Son of God has no where to lay his head.”* [v.58] In other words: we’re “roughing it.” We do not get to hear the person’s response, but the suggestion is that they turned back toward home.

 As for the two others: in the face of what you and I would consider very reasonable requests, Jesus seems to cut-off any discussion or excuses:

Your father has died and you want to come along *after* the funeral?—Nope, not a good enough excuse.

You want to take a moment to say goodbye to the family so they will not think you just disappeared?—Again, no. No—this is just an excuse, and it is not good enough.

Jesus sounds unreasonable and even harsh to most of us. It certainly does not sound like a good way to receive and encourage people to be a part of your ministry, does it?

One of the things I do every waking moment is I listen to and for stories—stories I hear or read, from friends, magazines, everywhere—I listen to any— and every— human story in the hope that the newest one will help me understand Scripture better. That is not hyperbole—I really do listen to every story I hear in an effort to understand Scripture better. Of course, I do have an added incentive: I listen for something helpful that I can use in a sermon.

In the case of this passage, I came across this story:

It is from a retired United Methodist pastor, Stan Purdum, who tells of a traveling evangelist who came to town with a large tent, which he set up not far from where Purdum was pastoring a church at the time. He had come to town for a revival.

 Many people from the area attended the tent services, in which the evangelist included an “altar call.” A lot of churches do this, and tent revivals are especially focused on “altar calls.” At some point in the worship service, the people are invited to come to the altar to accept Christ, those who have not done so already.

 The evangelist who came to Purdum’s town did just this, and after the he moved on to another place, that is another city, his staff sent local pastors the names of people from their communities who had made a “decision for Christ” so that the pastors could follow up. That’s the way the bibles usually work. Purdum received six cards with six names with addresses. He did not recognize any of the names, but he decided to visit them anyway.

He located all six, but in each case, he found the individual backing away from his or her “decision.” Most seemed embarrassed about the matter. One teenage girl said she only went forward because her friend did. One man said he got caught up in the emotions of the moment. Another said he already had a church, and when Purdum encouraged him to attend there, the man said, “Well, I might,” but he did not sound convincing. Purdum left his card with each person, along with an invitation to visit his church or even just to call him with questions, but he never heard from any of the six.

Purdum declines, however, to criticize these people. “Real discipleship is demanding,” he says, “and it takes a lot for a *spur-of-the-moment impulse* to become a lifetime commitment.

Most pastors I know have similar stories to tell. That, I believe is what this passage is about. Jesus is holding up to us a reflection of all that he knows about human beings—what is in our hearts and minds, what we are capable of and what we need help with.

And this *may* sound like bad news, news we should all be embarrassed about, but no. None of us should be *embarrassed*. And do not be “put off” because what sounds like bad news, because it really is our *good* news. What sounds like bad news is really Jesus telling us that we can be assured that Christ always knows who we are and what is in our heart at any given moment, and that he still loves us. Our good news is that we can, and should always count on knowing that Christ knows and understands us better than what we know of, or will admit, about ourselves.

When looked at it this way, Jesus’ response to the people in this passage becomes more understandable—Jesus does not let us off with the “feel good” feelings of intention. Instead, we and the people he speaks to, are treated with unrestrained honesty. In the very least, Jesus avoids offering us what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Neither will he let the emotion of the moment become a substitute for actual action*.* We are to hear this story and allow ourselves to come to terms with our own truth.

As for Jesus, the passage we just heard tells us that he has “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” That does not do justice to what has happened in Jesus’ heart and mind. In the translation known as *The Message,* Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of this part of the passage expresses it in this way:

*“When it came close to the time for his Ascension, he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem.”* [v. 51]

*“He steeled himself for the journey…”* Jesus’ immediate future is going to be filled with anguish and pain, and he knows it. When we remind ourselves of what Jerusalem means to him, his replies to the three people who offered to go with him do not seem quite so harsh. Indeed, his words are a reminder of what the stakes are for him and really for all of us.

If we are at all put off by the way in which Jesus speaks to the three people in this passage, what I would like to suggest is that we are feeling the same way they did—we feel a pang of recognition that what Jesus is asking, realizing it is even more serious than we knew. What may dawn on us is that following Jesus will require more that we had thought, perhaps more that we are prepared to offer…*at least in that moment*.

What I would like us to think about is that Jesus was focused on *one particular moment* in the story of his life. He is focused on the climax of his ministry, the climax and embodiment of his whole life and effort here on earth. He is determined to bring his life and ministry to its fulfilment, which is the ultimate demonstration of what God’s love is, what love is prepared to do and to give. Jerusalem is everything. It is his whole life.

It is also an event—it is the ultimate event, but it is also *one* event.

Jesus has “set his face toward Jerusalem,” and toward the most important event in his life, but this is also the “whole cloth” of his life—it is the entirety of what his life has been about the beginning, and it has been the way his life was focused for its entirety.

Teaching what it means to be loved by God has been at the core of every message, every act of healing he has displayed. His defiance of the established or conventional wisdom of his day, the way he welcomed all people into his circle of care, and his single-minded desire to honor God by loving God’s people—all of this has been with one objective in mind: Jerusalem. The cross. The love of God for each and every one of us.

This is what brought him to the cross. This is what he staked his life on—that event, that ultimate display of the depth, the enormity of God’s love.

It is what our lives should be about to, but with a difference, which is that *we* do not have to demonstrate what he did. Our job is to accept the love that he left for us, our job is to live within that love. Our job is to allow our whole lives to be a witness to the love of God. Human—*thoroughly* human though we are—we are to receive the love we have been given and build our lives upon it. And we must not be put off or discouraged that such building takes us our whole lives. It is meant to be.

You see, our faith, rather than one decision, or one event, must become a way of life, an on-going experience, a way of being. In writing about her faith, one young woman—a blogger who goes by the name, *Grace For the Road,* put it this way:

*“I thought it was a one-time decision. Will I put Jesus first? Yes. I will. So what did I think I meant…?*

*But then, she said, she started reading some of the harder parts of the Bible, the “parts where Jesus said you have to deny yourself and take up your cross daily and follow him. To die to self as he died for us. ‘Deny yourself.’ There’s no way to get around the fact that that means* everything *in life has to be less important than him.”*

*Grace also realized that putting Jesus first wasn’t just about the* decision *to be a disciple, but also about where her* heart *was. She said, “What he really wants is my heart, not my decisions ... for me to want him so much that the other stuff becomes secondary. And for me to actively want that every day. It’s not passive. It’s not coasting. But it’s also not drudgery. We love him. And so … we follow.”*

*Finally, Grace says, “[Putting Jesus first] becomes a daily conversation, a journey with him rather than a tally of major and minor decisions. The decisions start flowing out of the relationship.”*

For the love of God, Jesus was determined to get to Jerusalem. Nothing would stop him. Nothing and no one could have persuaded him not to go. He was single-minded and unwavering even though he knew what was waiting for him.

We are not him, and our future is not something we can know. What we *do* know is that whatever road we travel, Jesus has been there before us, and is with us even now.

What we need to ask ourselves is: where is our heart? Where are we going? What and where have we set our face toward?

Will our answers be as complete or as perfectly faithful as Jesus’? Probably not.

Will Christ stop loving us because of this? *Definitely not!*

This is our good news, that Christ knows this about us already and still he does not give-up on us. Rather, we are asked to be honest; to come to grips with who we are, and receive the amazing gift of God’s love which is to say, we are to accept God’s strength, God’s power in our lives, and God’s example of compassion and hope that is our model and our confidence, and which we can be a life of grace, and future bright with promise.

May we live with this joy. Amen.