

Sermon Reading: Luke 9:51-62

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”

⁵⁹ He said to another man, “Follow me.”

But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”

⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

⁶¹ Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

⁶² Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Sermon Theme: Focus When Following Christ

I recently came upon a couple of interesting quotes. Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Inc. (computer and general technology company) and highly successful business man said at an Apple Worldwide Developers Conference in 1997: *"People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things."* Another highly successful businessman and multibillionaire Warren Buffet said something similar: *"The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything."* Makes sense: to be focused means saying “no” to the not as important things and saying “yes” to the few things that truly matter. You think about all those distractions we face in our day-to-day lives from the pings and dings of cellphone notifications, the schedules with their never-ending to-do lists, the need for attention from family, friends, and it’s almost impressive that we can get anything done. So many good things that are blessings to our lives quickly can become distractions especially in our faith lives

as well. When we follow after these distractions they keep us from following Jesus with wholehearted attention.

We see Jesus' desire for our undivided attention as he addresses these different situations in Luke. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem, so he sends messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to warn them that he was on his way. But because of the hatred between the Samaritan people and the Jews, the Samaritans refused to welcome Jesus. James and John were not about to let that slide: **"Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"** And here we are with our first distraction said another way: "Lord, I will follow you as long as I can see that it's successful and going the way we had planned."

You finally work up the courage and invite them to church. You want them to know about Jesus. You know they are stuck in a sin. And they never show up. They ignore you. They stay in the sin. It hurts. How glorious it would feel to be able to call down holy fire from heaven; that would quickly fix the situation, right? Or we want to beat them over the head with the Law for everything they have done wrong, guilt and shame them until they do what is right because that will have quicker results. You might lose your temper and get upset all in the name of defending God because this isn't right! We give up on wanting to say anything or inviting them again, because it didn't work last time—they had their chance and they blew it!

And what does Jesus do? He rebukes us. That's not how you win souls for heaven. There's no place for that in Gospel ministry. Think: are you upset because they didn't listen to the Word, or more upset because they didn't listen to you? Focus on the task at hand: our job is to faithfully share the Word. Let God take care of the rest. If someone rejects it, they aren't rejecting you but Jesus.

As we walk with Jesus a man comes up, **"Lord, I will follow you wherever you go!"** From Jesus' response, this guy sounds a lot like me, **"Lord, I will follow you wherever you go! As long as I have the things I want and the type of life that I want to enjoy."** You know as well as I do how distracting our things can be: the possessions in our homes, the devices in our pockets, the money in the bank. The desire for more stuff but never having enough coupled with the fear of missing out on something can have us running in all sorts of directions from hobbies we enjoy to work we need to do. We might say, "Lord, I will follow you with my offerings, once I have what I want and am saving up for at home. I will follow you as long I have the life-style to keep up with my friends with the experiences I think I need to enjoy life. Lord, I don't want much, just a little bit more, and then I will be ready to follow you more."

Jesus replies (v.58), **"Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."** Who are we, the students, to think we deserve more than the teacher? Focus on what's important. Look past the life you have on this earth and see the riches you have in Jesus' forgiveness, the eternal home that waits you in heaven, the comfort he gives in his Word and Sacraments, the lasting feeling of fulfillment found only in Jesus. Thank the Lord for

the blessings he has given you to enjoy in this world by putting them in the right spot in your life behind following him.

We continue our walk with Jesus and this time Jesus calls a guy to follow him. This guy is all ready to go, but he needs to bury his father first. Jesus' response: there's no time for that. This isn't Jesus being hard-hearted or cruel here; no, it's simply Jesus not allowing sentimentality to get in the way of proclaiming the kingdom of God. Once you look past the emotions and feelings tied to the situation, the man is doing what I often do: **“Lord, I will follow you, once it fits better in my plans.”**

“Lord, I know I really need to do that visit and have that talk about that situation. I know I should make that phone call. But first I need to make sure the bulletin is done, the newsletter is all ready to go, I have these classes I need to prepare for, and the lawn needs to be mowed,” and look at that...the time is gone. All of those things really do need to be done, but they are not as important as proclaiming the kingdom of God to a child of God. Or it might be, “Lord, I will follow you as long as I don't have anything else planned or anything else comes up. Lord, I'm ready to follow you once the kids are a certain age, once I need to be more serious about life, once life gets less busy, after things settle down, once I have more time, once work lets up.” To which Jesus responds, **“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”** No other earthly affair—no matter how great it may seem or sentimental it might be—can measure up to the importance of following Jesus and sharing the truth of God's Word.

We continue our walk with Jesus and along the way we meet another guy eager to join the group: **“Lord, I will follow you; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”** Sounds pretty reasonable (Elisha had asked Elijah to do the same thing in 1 Kings 19). You would think this man would have made sure to take care of that already. But Jesus recognizes what is in the man's heart as he recognizes the motivation and attitude of our own. The man is too distracted with looking back to what he is leaving at home.

The tie of family can be strong and a real blessing but even that can be a distraction from following Jesus and preaching the Word. “Lord, forgive me when I didn't say something to the member who I saw in the store and hadn't been in church for a while simply because I was with family. Lord, forgive me when I know I should have said something because what they did was sinful, but they were family. Lord, forgive me for not continuing to go after them, inviting them, encouraging them, because they were family.”

But it's not just our families but also our relationships with friends and acquaintances who can keep us from following Christ with undivided attention. Instead you may be looking back making sure he is happy and she is comfortable in those relationships before taking care of your relationship with God. So Jesus says, **“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the service in the kingdom of God.”** What is pulling your eyes back to the past and

keeping you from looking ahead to the work that God has laid out for you? Is it your relationships? Is it your hobbies? Is it past church accomplishments? Is it personal accomplishments and things you used to do for the church and with the church? It's nice to see those straight lines when we glance back and we thank God for those blessings that have brought us to this point today. But even those good things can become distractions when they keep us from keeping our eyes forward on following Jesus.

The fact is that when we follow those distractions we are playing into the devil's hand. Because instead of chasing after the kingdom of God and promoting its spread, we are too busy running in all these other directions. Then the devil uses those same distractions to pull us further away from God and deeper into ourselves looking for ways to put my will before God's.

But don't go home thinking this just means I need to get rid of those distractions in my life and then I will be a worthy follower of Jesus. Jesus doesn't just want the part of you that's not distracted by physical possessions or earthly relationships. He's not satisfied with just a single part. He wants all of you. And so he sets his face to Jerusalem because it's there that he will suffer and die to win you. He isn't distracted by seemingly failed ministry plans, he doesn't allow the comforts of this world to deter him, he doesn't let all these other things that others may have wanted him to do to turn him around, he doesn't allow his friends or family to hold him back. He set his eyes on accomplishing that plan to save easily distracted sinners like you and me. And so he goes to the cross becoming sin for us so that we might be made perfect like him. He suffers so that you and I don't have to keep on trying to be a better Christian to be worthy of following him. He is punished so you don't have to keep trying to be a less-distracted person so that you can be in his presence. Jesus dies to remove the heavy burden on your conscience so you can live sin-free, guilt-free, and set free with the forgiveness of sins. Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem, resolutely going because already then he knows that he is going to win, he knows he will be raised to life and be welcomed back in heaven. Now having accomplished all of that, Jesus sends the Spirit working through water and Word to make you his own. Not just a part, but all. The old man of sin is drowned in baptism and you are raised a new creation with Jesus.

And now, having you as his own, Jesus continues to work so that you focus on following him. When we struggle on the way, he's right there setting his face towards the goal leading you to be with him. When I am distracted by one thing and then another, Jesus is there in His Word to direct your thoughts to be in line with his. Jesus works in you to will and act according to his purpose to get rid of that which distracts and pulls you away from him and to desire to share the Good News of his love. When you start lagging behind, Jesus works through your brothers and sisters in Christ, your pastor, the Word and Sacrament to bring you along to follow him because he wants you, every part of you, to be with him in heaven. Amen.