

October 24, 2010

Scripture: Luke 9: 51-62

Sermon: "Choices in Faith, Choice in Life"

When I first decided to answer the call to ministry, I tried to make bargains and guidelines for God to follow in exchange for me "taking up the mantle of ministry leadership in the church. I am not a morning person so I would try to bargain with God to achieve ministry on my terms. "God, I'll be a minister in your church but I don't want to talk to anyone before 10:00 a.m." I also tried bargaining with God on when exactly I would step into the minister's role. "God, I'll give you Sundays and Mondays. I might even give you Tuesdays and Wednesdays. But the rest of the time is mine."

So when I entered seminar, I took my first position in a church that only required me to be at the church on Sundays for worship and youth group. I was only required to be in church for worship which started at 10:45 a.m. I knew that I had followed the call but something was missing.

And then it hit me. I was missing God. I had set boundaries and stipulations on my following God. When God said "Follow me, I came up with excuses and bargains. I went into ministry on my terms and not God's. My ministry was empty. My ministry was unfulfilling. My ministry was excuses and bargains, not faithful servant-hood, not answering the call. I had become a slave to my bargain and the result was hard work and emptiness. I would work with the youth but there was no real connection. I worship with the congregation but there was no freedom to experience the grace of God. I had become a slave to my excuses and bargains.

I soon realized that when God had said follow me, that there was no pressure until I added it. There were no strings attached until I attached them. God had given me the freedom to choose. God had given me the freedom to follow and I became a slave to my demands.

I soon realized that the call to discipleship is an all or nothing experience. There is no "catch me at 10:00 a.m. and I'll be your disciple then." There is no "Sundays only" call to be a disciple. When God extends the invitation to Follow Me, God is offering an intimate relationship with God based on liberating grace and the freedom to follow.

And that is what our story is about today.

Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He begins his long journey to death. He embraces his vocation, his calling, his purpose with determination and no faltering. And he encounters on his journey moments where people are given the opportunity to follow.

Jesus and his disciples come upon a village. And he is turned away. The disciples have seen the miracles that Jesus has performed. They have seen Jesus heal people and they have heard his teachings. And they are shocked that some people would actually turn away Jesus. Shocked!

So James and John take it upon themselves to devise a plan to "get back" at the people for rejecting Jesus. "Alright, Jesus, hear is what we are thinking: We are going to rain down a little fire from heaven. That way, these people won't exist anymore. That will teach them for reject you."

And Jesus just turns to them. Weren't they paying attention at all? Don't they know God at all? "James, John it is their choice of whether or not to follow me. It is their choice of whether or not they want to

accept me into their lives. God gave God's people the freedom of free will. God doesn't want a forced relationship with God's people. God wants a relationship with God's people where love is freely given, and where grace is freely accepted. "God has chosen to relate to the world in freedom."

And God's people have the freedom to follow or not. No strings. No pressure. God's people have been given the opportunity to find a fulfilling vocation and purpose through a relationship with God. And God's people have the choice and the freedom to follow or not.

So Jesus moves on and encounters a young man who is filled with passion for Jesus. This young man says that he will go wherever Jesus goes. And Jesus basically tells this young man to follow him for the right reasons. Don't follow Jesus for power. Don't follow Jesus for money. Don't follow Jesus because it will not be a glamorous life. You have the freedom to follow for the right reasons. You have the freedom to choose to follow and experience something new.

And abruptly Jesus moves on until he encounters another. He says "Follow me". And Jesus is given excuses. "I'll be right there. I just need to bury my father."

And we as modern readers are a little shocked by Jesus' response. "Let the dead bury the dead. Go proclaim the kingdom."

This is not the Jesus that we all know and love. Where is the compassion? And we think Jesus, let the man bury his dad and he'll be right there.

We see a reasonable request. Jesus sees excuses and bargains.

We as modern readers don't understand that there was an ancient tradition that the sons to bury the fathers and mourning starts. And this is a long process. It can go on for days.

And many of the commentators also noted that we don't know if the father has just passed away or this son will wait until his father eventually does, which may take years.

We see a reasonable request. Jesus sees excuses and bargains.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his time is short. He doesn't have time for anything that relates to death for he is bringing new life to all who embrace their freedom to follow. Time is short. Jesus doesn't have time for wishy-washy disciples.

And Jesus abruptly moves on again and extends the invitation to another. "Follow me."

"Sounds good Jesus. Just let me go talk to my parents and I'll be right there!"

We see a reasonable request. Jesus sees excuses and bargains.

And Jesus once again says "Don't bother! If you can't go and proclaim the kingdom without looking back, you won't see what is up ahead. How will you see the kingdom coming if you keep looking back?"

Once again as modern readers we don't understand the ancient traditions that form this story. When the son went back to the house, more than likely his family would not let him leave. They would lose a worker. They would lose income. That son would not be coming back to follow Jesus.

We see a reasonable request. Jesus sees excuses and bargains.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem and his time is short. Jesus doesn't have time for wishy-washy disciples.

Jesus has come to extend the invitation to Follow. And we as God's people have the freedom to follow or not. No strings. No pressure. We as God's people have been given the opportunity to find a fulfilling vocation and purpose through a relationship with God. And God's people have the choice and the freedom to follow or not.

We as readers are left with questions and wondering what will these young people do. Will they discover that they have missed out on an amazing experience? Will they discover that their lives are just empty shells compared to the new life that was offered to them? Will they discover that they have become slaves to their excuses and bargains and are not truly free?

The life of a disciple is hard. The life of discipleship is more than the assurance of comfort and security. The life of discipleship is more than power and might. The life of discipleship is more than money.

The life of discipleship is an opportunity to place God above all things in our lives. The life of discipleship is about our allegiance to Christ taking precedence over everything in our lives.

When God extends the invitation to Follow Me, God is offering an intimate relationship with God based on liberating grace and the freedom to follow. And we have the freedom to follow or become slaves to all those things that we use and do before putting God first in our lives.

Following Jesus is an opportunity to become intimately related both to welcoming Jesus into our lives and to embodying in one's life his commitments and practices.

Time is short. Jesus doesn't have time for wishy-washy disciples.

Christian discipleship, when correctly understood, prompts us to actualize creative, experiential and actualized values in a way that guarantees life with meaning and purpose.

Jesus died before he could finish the portrait of God and it is up to us as his disciples to complete the picture. Time is short. Jesus doesn't have time for wishy-washy disciples.

God has extended to us all the call to follow God. And we as children of God have the freedom to follow or not. We see reasonable requests and Jesus only sees excuses and bargains.

Being a disciple is an all or nothing experience. There are no excuses. There are no bargains.

We have been given the gift to freely follow Jesus and to experience his liberating grace and hope in our lives. To enter into a relationship with God where love is freely given and grace is freely accepted. When God extends the invitation to follow me, God is asking us as people of faith to put God above all things in our lives and to experience God's freeing peace in our lives. We have the freedom to follow. No strings attached. No pressure. Just an invitation. Follow me.

May we all accept God's invitation to follow in our lives. Amen.