

"Don't Look Back"
Luke 9:51-62

Jesus said, "Foxes have dens, and birds have nests, but there's no place for me to call home."

A would-be follower said, "Lord, first let me go bury my father." But Jesus said, "Let the people who are spiritually dead bury the dead, but you, go announce the kingdom of God."

"I'll follow you, Lord, but first let me say good-bye to my family," another one said. But Jesus said, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and [keeps looking] back is fit for the kingdom of God."

You know what happens if you look back when you're plowing, don't you? Right, you'll plow a crooked furrow.ⁱ Looking back can have disastrous consequences.

"A Sunday school teacher was telling the story of Lot's wife, who turned into a pillar of salt because *she* looked back. One of the children interrupted the story to say, 'That's nothing. We were driving downtown yesterday, and my mother looked back and turned into a telephone pole.'ⁱⁱ

It's an old joke, corny, but true. If we keep looking back where we've been instead of where God's leading us, we'll never get where we're going.

Elisha was plowing a field when Elijah the prophet called him to follow him. Elisha said, "[At least] let me kiss my father and mother [good-bye], and then I'll come with you."ⁱⁱⁱ "O.K.," Elijah said, "Go say your good-byes, but then come back to me, because God has something else in mind for you."

Elisha went to say good-bye but first he slaughtered all twenty-four of his oxen, cooked the meat over a fire made with their wooden yokes, and gave a feast for his friends and family. After dinner, he got up and followed Elijah.

Why? Well, it was probably symbolic of the dramatic change in direction his life was taking. He's no longer Elisha, the plowman. Now he's Elisha, the prophet's apprentice. Killing the team and burning their yokes was his way of burning his bridges behind him, never to return to his old job. He'd started a whole new life with a total commitment.^{iv}

It couldn't have been easy for Elisha. There are hints that he was too attached to his family, and the number of oxen he had means he was well off when many people were going hungry. But God's call through Elijah's invitation was strong enough to get Elisha to leave home and comfort behind him after a quick good-bye to his family, and a going away party with his friends.

Some of you may have heard Denise or me tell about Germán Crespo, whom she and I were fortunate to have as our house guest briefly a couple of times more than twenty years ago. A pediatrician, he was the Secretary of Social Services for the Evangelical Methodist Church of Bolivia, with which our Annual Conference had a covenant of *cooperación*. Germán shared his soft-spoken but powerful message with a few of us gathered at the church one evening. Afterwards we asked him about his medical training. He told us about his education in Hungary, and how he'd gone to Sweden to live after he finished medical school and his internship. He had a good job, a nice place to live, a car. He was comfortable. Compared to his Aymara Indian family and friends on the high Bolivian plains, the *Altiplano*, he was fabulously rich.

But one day a boy on the street held out a cup for donations, shaking it, rattling the money in it and saying, "Help, help." "Help who?" German asked him. "The people of Bolivia," the boy said. "What are you going to do for them?" asked German. "We're going to send a missionary because they are hungry and poor," the boy answered.

That was it for Germán. He knew then that he had to go back to Bolivia. And he did, giving up his comfortable life and risking his freedom and life because of his past criticism of the incredibly corrupt and violently oppressive Bolivian government. But God had called. He couldn't wait. He had to go.

Jesus wasn't as understanding as Elijah. He wouldn't even let his would-be disciples take the time to look back, let alone say good-bye.

His words are in one of those passages that bother us not because we don't understand them, but because we *do*. There's no pussy-footing around it.

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem, and he knows what's waiting for him there. If you want to follow him, you'd better drop everything and come now. There's no time left for long good-byes, for looking back with regrets, for longing for the good old days. Jesus isn't about to be sidetracked. A cross is waiting for him at the end of the road.

We look for the loopholes. There aren't any. We try to explain away his impossible demands by saying it's an exaggeration, a hyperbole, a metaphor. But it's not that easy. Jesus is asking for the world, for a commitment with no escape clause, not a lukewarm loyalty we can sandwich in-between our other loyalties, but a commitment that comes before everything else - comfort, security, career - even before the best of our allegiances - even ahead of motherhood and apple pie, before friends, family, country. For him it's not family, God, and country. It's God first, family and country second - if at all.

For Jesus it's a matter of life and death. He's about to pay with his life for his unflinching loyalty to God right to the end. Why should we expect him to offer his followers a discounted ticket?'

We don't do ourselves or anybody else a favor when we soft-pedal the commitment required to follow Jesus. When people thought the cost of following him was too high, Jesus let them go, sometimes with tears in his eyes.

He could never be accused of downplaying just what it might mean to follow him. He didn't hide the part about the cross in fine print.

Martin Luther King, Jr. once told about how he came to be where he was in the civil rights movement: "... 'Now of course I was religious. I grew up in the church. I'm the son of a preacher... My grandfather was a preacher, my great-grandfather was a preacher, only brother is a preacher, my daddy's brother is a preacher, so I didn't have much of a choice, I guess. But I had grown up in the church, and the church meant something to me, but it was a kind of inherited religion and I had never felt an experience with God in the way you must if you're going to walk the lonely paths of life.'

"Nevertheless, Martin went to seminary, following in the footsteps of his father and his father's father. Even when he went to his first parish in Montgomery, Alabama, he still had not had a firsthand experience of God, and he frequently considered pursuing a career in teaching. But then, in that same city a woman named Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus, and Martin found himself in the midst of a boycott of the bus lines. Although Martin had only been in Montgomery a year and he was only twenty-seven years old, he quickly became a leader of the movement. It was not long before his family started getting threatening phone calls, sometimes as many as forty in a single day. He wondered if he could take it. He wanted out.

"Then one night, around midnight, another threatening call came through: 'Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out and blow up your house.'

"Years later, Martin recalled, 'I sat there and thought about a beautiful little daughter who had just been born...she was the darling of my life. I'd come in night after night and see that little gentle smile. And I sat at the kitchen table thinking about that little girl and thinking that she could be taken from me any minute.'

"And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer, I was weak. Something said to me, you can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something in that person that your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can find a way out of no way, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed my head over that cup of coffee. I will never forget it...I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night.

"And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me. And it seemed in that moment that I could hear a voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world. I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on."

"And that, of course, is just what he did...."^{vi}

Jesus never said following him would be easy. It means having to make hard choices - not between good and evil so much as between good and good. What's wrong with wanting my family to be safe and reasonably comfortable?

Nothing - until our fears keep us from being the people God's calling us to be, people whose lives count for something more.

Church nominating committees are notorious for downplaying the work involved in the jobs we ask people to do. Sometimes we cut the expectations to the bare minimum hoping somebody will finally say "yes," and one more slot will be filled. But it's unfair to the recruit who later finds out there's a whole lot more to the job than he or she bargained for. It's unfair to the person whose God-given gifts are never discovered or used because she's never asked. And it's unfair to the church when someone takes the invitation at face value and never really takes the responsibility seriously.

"E. Stanley Jones said that we inoculate the world with a mild form of Christianity so that it will be immune to the real thing."^{vii}

One time somebody gave me a list of alternate hymn titles: Instead of "I Surrender All" it's "I Surrender Some," instead of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," it's "What an Acquaintance..." Or how about, "Where He Leads Me, I Will *Consider Following?*" Not "Oh, How I Love Jesus" but "Oh, How I *Like* Jesus," Not "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" but "Blest Be the Tie that Doesn't Cramp My Style."

"The real danger to professing Christians [it's been said] lies not in the more glaring and grosser temptations and sins, but in a slow deterioration of vision, a slow death to daring, courage and willingness to adventure."^{viii}

A "...congregation ...initiated a program of evangelism. Let's go throughout the neighborhood and win folk to Christ [, they said.]

"About six months into the program [they] evaluated [their] work. A group... got together and discussed how things were going. By all accounts, things were going quite well. [They] were growing. A rather amazingly large number of people had responded favorably to [their] invitation to attend [their] church. Attendance had grown, so had ...membership. What more could [they] ask for a program of evangelism?

"'But something bothers me about all this,' said Gladys. 'Here we go, knocking on neighbors' doors, urging them to come to our church, to accept Christ. But what are we inviting them to? We tell them that we have a great youth program, that we will do this or that for their children. We have great summer activities for all ages, a picnic in the fall. We have pastoral counseling, good music in our services, great preaching. In other words, we have all these services to meet your needs, to entertain you, to fix what's wrong with your life.'

"What's wrong with that? [they] asked. After all, isn't the church here to meet their needs?

"'Seems like I remember,' continued Gladys, 'somewhere it says, 'Take up your cross and follow me.'"

"And [they] were silent. Remembering that discipleship, Christian discipleship is something else again. How in the world do we call people to Jesus, appealing to their selfishness, their needs, and then end up with the [kind of discipleship Jesus is talking about?]

But what's wrong with giving my father a decent burial? Isn't there something in the Ten Commandments about honoring your father and mother? What's wrong with being sure our families are taken care of before we come along with Jesus? Isn't that putting our families first? Didn't Jesus himself bless a marriage with his first miracle? Didn't he have time for children when most adults didn't?

There have been a lot of attempts to explain Jesus' apparently harsh saying, "Let the dead bury the dead." There's even a recent book titled *Is Jesus Mean?*

One explanation is that Jesus is speaking symbolically about the dead burying the dead – meaning let those who are spiritually dead – and not willing to follow – take care of the burial. Others say that Jesus is referring to the belief that the world of the living and the dead are two separate realms, unalterably divorced from each other. In that case, it is the duty of the dead to welcome this man's father into that other realm.

It's also been pointed out that Jewish burial customs in Jesus' time included reburial of bones in an ossuary (or bone) box, which is true. I've seen a few of those boxes on the Mount of Olives. After a period of a year or so, mourners take the remains out of a tomb to put in an ossuary.^{ix}

But it's probably more likely that this would-be disciple's father isn't terminally ill, hasn't just died, and isn't in need of reburial. This is a culture, like most in the world, in which a body left unburied is a mark of shame, and, like many, in which a proper burial is an act of honoring one's parents. This would-be follower uses a phrase still spoken in the Middle East to say that he wants to live at home long enough to care for his father or parents *until* they die. *Then* he will follow Jesus. To ask his father for permission to leave to follow Jesus might be like telling him he wishes he were dead so he'd be free of any obligations to him as his son.^x

A further possibility is that if this man leaves home while his father is still living, and he has younger brothers, he's worried about losing his inheritance to his brothers who stay at home to fulfill what should have been his duty. In that case, this potential disciple, like the rich young man who came to Jesus asking what more he needed to do, may be too attached to his possessions.

Fred Craddock, story-telling preacher and New Testament professor emeritus, has said about this passage, "The radicality of Jesus' words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them."^{xi}

In a provocative book, *Death of the Church*, Mike Regele tells about accompanying Pastor Ray Stedman on a speaking trip to a conference at Frenchlick where they heard a psychologist speak on living happily as a Christian in successful ministry. There was something missing in the message but Mike couldn't put his finger on it. Finally Ray Stedman did for him. "There is no death in his message."^{xii}

It's not that the message has to be morbid. But if there's nothing worth dying for, then there's nothing worth living for, either.

The playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote: "This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one... being a force of Nature instead of a feverish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy."^{xiii}

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, who dared to talk with dying patients about death, said, "It's only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth - and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up - then we will begin to live each day to the fullest, as if it was the only one we had."^{xiv}

"The reason [isn't] that we need to get on with it and decide, lest we delay, and are, at the end, lost. The reason is there is life to be had in the here-and-now and every minute, hour and day lived half-heartedly is a minute, hour, and day in which we have rejected the gift of life."^{xv}

That's what the kingdom of God is about.

It's not easy following Jesus, and more often than not we get off the road on some dead-end wild goose chase, some trivial pursuit. We talk the talk but don't walk it. But if we weren't at least trying, we probably wouldn't even have bothered coming here this morning. Jesus knows that. So we pray for forgiveness, for grace, and for strength to walk beside him on that long, dusty road to Jerusalem.

We're not there yet. We're on a journey. That's what Christian faith is - a journey. Before it was ever called Christianity, it was called the Way, and Christians were known as followers of the Way. That's because at its heart our faith is a way of life. We're on the way, but we're not there yet. We don't have any business inviting people to join us if we think we've got it made here in our little comfortable church. But we have every right to invite them to join us as fellow pilgrims on the journey.

You never know who you'll meet on the road, but if you don't go, you'll never know what you missed, either...

ⁱ Culpepper, R. Alan, "Luke," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 217.

ⁱⁱ Detrick, R. Blaine, *Emphasis* 10:1 June 1980, 27. *emphasis added*.

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Kings 19:20, adapted.

^{iv} Cf. Ciferni, Andrew D., *Emphasis* 10:1 June 1980, 27.

^v Cf. Craddock, Fred, *Preaching the New Common Lectionary Year C After Pentecost*, 66-67.

^{vi} Copenhaver, Martin *Pulpit Digest* January/February 1995, 7-8.

^{vii} Hauerwas, Stanley and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 90.

^{viii} Phillips, J.B. quoted in Donald McGilchrist, "Changing Face of Missions," *Discipleship Journal* Jan/Feb. 1990, in *Windows to Truth* 11:2 March/April/May 1990, 12.

^{ix} Cf. Sermonwriter, Exegesis Luke 9:51-19:54: Journey to Jerusalem. Lectionary.Org, <http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG-English/NT/ENT03-Luke/Luke%2009.51-62.htm>

^x Sermonwriter, Exegesis Luke 9:51-19:54: Journey to Jerusalem. Lectionary.Org, <http://www.lectionary.org/EXEG-English/NT/ENT03-Luke/Luke%2009.51-62.htm>

^{xi} Craddock, Fred, *Interpretation: Luke*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990)144.

^{xii} Regele, Mike, and Mark Schulz *Death of the Church*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 17.

^{xiii} Willimon, William *Pulpit Resource* 22:1 January, February, March 1994, 14.

^{xiv} "Illustrations," *Sermonnotes* on-line April, May 1998, 6.

^{xv} Marris, Ross "Charting the Course," *Emphasis* 16:1 June 1986, 33.