

September 8, 2019

“How Will You Respond?”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 9:51, 57-62

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Well, another summer is drawing to an end, It's Rally Day, and another very busy church year is upon us. Sunday School and Youth Groups are getting started, we just had a successful clothing sale to benefit "Belonging To Each Other," The Wellness Fair is just three weeks away, the organ recital is scheduled in October, there's a Heroes In Transition benefit coming up, Trunk or Treat will be here for before you know it, and there's even more! And that's just the start. Take a look at our church calendar and you'll see what I mean! And doesn't it feel good to be part of an active, growing church? But, we also know that, as we prepare for the year ahead, the fact is, it's going to take a considerable amount of hard work and sacrifice to keep our church growing, moving forward, sharing the good news Christ offers with the people around us. And sometimes we may be tempted to say, “Why am I doing all this?” or “I'd rather be doing something else,” or even, "Is it worth it?” So, today, I want to talk about how and why we are called to be followers and disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And that's why I chose some difficult verses for today's Scripture reading. You see, when we initially hear what Jesus says to those who desire to follow him, his words may appear somewhat insensitive, or even cruel. But as it often is with Jesus, there is more here than meets the eye, or the ear. And if we really reflect on what Jesus is saying, I think we'll find that they are, in fact, words that will help us find faith, peace and joy in our life.

Let me explain. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where he knows he will be crucified. His time on earth is almost over, so there's a sense of urgency to everything he is doing and saying. That's why he's calling people to work with him, to help in growing the kingdom of God, moving it forward, sharing his good news with the people around him. And someone does come up to Jesus and says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Just like we are apt to say. But Jesus warns him, “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man, well, he doesn't even have any place to lay his head, he isn't sure where his next meal is coming from.” In effect, Jesus is telling the person that anything can happen on the journey of discipleship, and we need to be ready when things don't go as planned or when it's just plain hard. Because, isn't it true, that in our most selfless moments, it's easy for us to say we want to follow Christ and work for his kingdom. But when things get a little difficult or demanding, it's easy to want to give up or walk away. But true discipleship means we are to persevere no matter what. Jesus' point is

that when you follow him, and you don't know where you will lay your head, or where your next meal is coming from – when you feel the demands and sacrifice are too great, you have to remember God will provide. God will give you the strength, the energy, all that you need to do the task he has given you. Because the truth is, in working for the Lord, the task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you. Let me say that again. In working for the Lord, the task ahead of you is never as great as the power behind you. As disciples of Christ, we are called to God's work. And the thing is, there is great reward in that work. When the disciples told Jesus how much they had sacrificed for him, he told them, "Whoever has done these things for my sake will receive back a hundredfold." He said "Give and it will be given to you in such abundance it will pour into your lap." In the parable of the talents, God the Master, said, "Well, done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master." These are the promises of our Lord, to those who are faithful and sacrifice and work for the good of his kingdom.

You know, this past week, as we all followed the path of Hurricane Dorian, I was struck by the terrifying videos taken by people in the Bahamas trapped in their houses as the flood waters literally rose around them with no rescue in sight. And then to see the devastating photos of the aftermath. And it reminded me of a story that our former Bishop Weaver told about another island in the Caribbean – Haiti. He was personal friends with two men, Sam Dixon and Clint Rabb, who were officials with UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief. They were on assignment in Haiti when a huge earthquake hit. Now these two men understood the hard work of discipleship. Foxes have holes and birds have nests, and Sam and Clint laid their heads on a bed in a nondescript place called the Hotel Montana. And as you will soon hear, they found their reward not in the things of this world, but in the joy of following Jesus Christ and building up his kingdom.

Back to the scripture. As Jesus is walking along, he specifically goes up to someone and invites him to, "Follow me." A personal invitation. Like he gives us all the time. And the man asks Jesus to wait while he buries his father, but Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury the dead; as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Now, here's a son who just wants to mourn the loss of his father, which sounds more than reasonable, doesn't it? So what is Jesus saying? Well, let's look at our own lives. We have all experienced loss of some kind, and we have mourned. Mourned the loss of a loved one, loss of a relationship, loss of our health, loss of our job, loss of our youthfulness, loss of a dream, loss of an opportunity, loss of life as we once knew it. And that's where our faith wavers the most, isn't it? When we feel defeated by life's circumstances, when we feel God doesn't care, when we are mourning

our situation. But Jesus answers, “Let the dead, the losses, the past, bury itself. Put all those things behind you. Bury your old hurts, old sorrows, old habits, old resentments, old ways. Because for you, a follower and disciple, you have God’s promise that he has plans for your life – a life with a future and hope. Now go and proclaim that life. For in me you are a new creation. I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.”

Let me go back to the Bishop’s friends in Haiti. They were in Haiti because they were working to improve basic health services there. They and four others were in the lobby of the Hotel Montana, when suddenly the earthquake struck and they were all buried alive in the rubble. Their bodies were pinned under tons of concrete and they were trapped there for more than two days. And in the end, both Sam and Clint died. But the four survivors of the earthquake shared with Bishop Weaver what transpired during those long hours. And the most remarkable thing is that in the midst of all that death and destruction and despair, lying there hurt and bleeding, there was no mourning among that group. They did not mourn what happened to them, they did not mourn what could have been, they did not mourn their past or regrets or sorrows or decisions. Instead they spoke to one another and proclaimed life. They affirmed the joy that there was in following Christ and they told stories about their faith. One woman was able to reach in her purse and found a tootsie roll, and she shared it among the six. I’m sure they all felt it was a sacramental meal, perhaps to them, like their Last Supper. They went around and lifted up the names of family and friends and they prayed for each one. They did not despair of death because they were too busy rejoicing in the life to come.

And finally in our scripture, someone comes up to Jesus and says, “I will follow you, but let me first go back and say good-bye to those at home.” In effect saying, “let me spend a few more hours or days living in the world.” But Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” You see, as we go through life, we are called to work and sow the seeds of the kingdom of God. The seeds that ultimately yield the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, and gentleness. And aren't those things this world needs desperately right now? To me, Jesus’ metaphor hits home because my father and both of my grandfathers were farmers. And when they plowed and sowed their seed, they said they had to keep their eyes focused on a point ahead of them and plow toward that spot. Because if you get distracted and look behind you for any reason, you’ll get off track and the rows will be crooked. The seed will be scattered and the crop won’t grow properly. So to have a productive, high yielding, fruitful crop, the rows had to be straight. And if we

are to sow the seeds of a productive, high yielding, fruitful life, we must follow the straight path toward the kingdom. Discipleship means we must stay focused growing the kingdom of God, and not get off track.

Let me return once more to Haiti. Clint died of his injuries shortly after he was rescued, but as the hours drifted on under the rubble, it became apparent that the rescuers would not arrive in time for Sam Dixon. And yet, the survivors relate how Sam kept his hand to the plow and his eyes looking focused on the promise of the Kingdom of God. For suddenly, as they were all lying there, Sam began to sing... “I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul. I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river, I’ve got peace like a river in my soul.” And then they all joined him in the next verse...(Invite everyone to sing) “I’ve got joy like a fountain, I’ve got joy like a fountain, I’ve got joy like a fountain in my soul. I’ve got joy like a fountain, I’ve got joy like a fountain, I’ve got joy like a fountain in my soul.” Amen.