

"Invitation, Command, or Opportunity?"

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 13
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 9: 51-62

"He set his face to go to Jerusalem." With that sentence, Luke begins the second half of his tale about Jesus of Nazareth. And for the next ten chapters we join this Jesus on his sojourn, which is much more about destiny and dedication than about direction. Jerusalem is where the power resides and a confrontation awaits. Jerusalem, you see, is more about a cross than a map reference.

And, right off the bat, two important things happen both recorded and read for us in our chosen Gospel text. First, Jesus meets rejection from those very people he has gotten into trouble for befriending – the Samaritans. In fact, if you follow the sequence of Jesus' mission, he was met with rejection every step of the way – first in Galilee, then by Gentiles, today by Samaritans, and finally by Jerusalem itself. Interesting, is it not, Jesus is rejected by the very people he died on a cross to save.

But I want to focus us on the second thing of importance that happened as he began making his way to Jerusalem. He is going to set the tone for walking with him right up front. I'm reminded of the old story of the pig and the chicken who were walking one day through the impoverished streets of a third world village. The chicken says to the pig, "Look at all these starving children. We ought to do something. Let's cook up some scrambled eggs and ham for them!"

To which the pig replied, "Easy for you to say. That's involvement for you, but it's total commitment for me!"

Well, let's examine this commitment we hear Jesus asking for in our passage today. We'll do that by examining two little words Jesus spoke, "Follow me," and note some things about this episode. Then, we'll raise a few relevant questions about our own discipleship to ponder.

We will begin with a few things to tuck away for future recall or reference, and I'll just tick these off in no particular order.

First, note that Jesus uses these words, "Follow me," repeatedly when engaging people; 22 times, in fact, in the New Testament, more than any other directive.

Second, note please the exact words he uses – "Follow me." He doesn't say "Worship me," or "give me something," or even "love me." He says "Follow me" – meaning: walk with me, come with me, watch me, listen to me, learn from me, be close by, follow me.

Note also (third notation) that he doesn't say "Follow me after you've straightened yourselves out," or "after you've learned everything you can," or "after you've memorized every commandment and teaching of mine," or "after you've stopped all your bad behaviors and selfish actions," or "Follow me after you've made yourselves good enough." No, it's a "come as you are" invitation.

Fourth, in the story all three people who hear Jesus say "Follow me" have pretty good excuses why they can't follow Jesus right this minute. The first one questions the accommodations on the journey. The second guy has to fulfill familial obligations and bury his father. And the third would like at least to go and say "goodbye" to her family.

Fifth noted point – Jesus won't accept any of it. Discipleship is about sacrifice; about looking ahead, not behind; about following a person who walks in front of us encouraging, not behind us prodding. It is an opportunity to join in a mission to preach and proclaim Good News in a world that has always been desperate to hear some. It is a chance to learn about what life (your life, my life) really means in the grand scheme of things.

And finally sixth -- note, please, how each of the three disciple wannabees reacted to Jesus' rejection of their excuses. Did you notice? Luke doesn't tell us. We don't know if they went back home about their daily business, or joined Jesus after taking care of those things, or simply walked away and ignored the command. We are left to wonder and conjecture.

Which leads us nicely to the issue and important question of how we hear and respond to these words of Jesus that continue to echo down through the centuries reaching the ears and hearts of disciples of each generation? I don't know if you caught it, but I purposely used three different descriptors to identify Jesus' "Follow me" words, all describing different ways we might hear those words for our lives.

Are they a "command?" Do you hear Jesus' "Follow me" primarily as the marching orders whispered into our ears at our baptisms? Is that how you experience God – someone to be followed because, after all, it is God through Christ who says so and we want to be obedient disciples? When we sign up for the Kingdom, we become a part of God's army in the world and, therefore, "follow me" spoken by the Commander-in-Chief means just that – get in line, face front, follow the one with the holes in his hands and the crown of thorns on his head. Do these words reach your ears and sound like a "command?"

Or, are they an "invitation?" Do you hear Jesus' "follow me" primarily as encouragement to follow along and to listen and watch and learn from this amazing preacher, teacher, prophet, Jesus of Nazareth? Did you understand these words at your baptism as an invitation to a new life, one where self is secondary to the needs of others; where service replaces reward; and where love toward others replaces the narcissism of the world around us? Do you hear these words as an invitation to join Jesus in the struggle for justice, equality and fair-play for this world? Do you understand "follow me" as a call to be peacemakers and hungry-feeders and forgiveness-bearers? Do these words reach your ears today and sound like an "invitation?"

Or, are they an "opportunity?" Do you hear Jesus say "Follow me" and you experience his words in your heart and mind as a chance to actually be a disciple of Jesus? Here is your chance to step up and make a difference in this lonely and darkened world. Here is an opportunity to shine God's light on those who cower in corners and feel abandoned by this world. Does "follow me" sound like a chance to serve in Jesus name; your chance at

the plate, with Jesus encouraging "show me what you got"? Do these words reach your ears and sound like an "opportunity?"

Are you still with me? This discipleship, "follow me," stuff put us on some rugged theological terrain this morning. So, let's gather by the side of the road for a moment and let me suggest an answer to all the questions I just raised. Are the words "Follow me" spoken by Jesus a command, or an invitation, or an opportunity? Certainly your personal answer depends on where you are on life's road and how you hear Jesus' call in your own heart, mind and soul. But let me suggest that the answer to the question is a resounding "Yes!"

Is Jesus call a command? Yes, absolutely, but if it is only a command, it can become too much of a burden. As a command and only a command, it convicts us time and time again of our half-heartedness to follow. It's that old Lutheran understanding of the Law again – if it is a command and only a command, it becomes a mirror that convicts us. If that's the only way we hear it, we will live our lives in fear and guilt because we simply can't meet its obligations. Or, we'll just give up for fear of failure in being a devoted disciple. So, it can't be just a command.

If we hear it only as an invitation, it becomes a take it or leave it deal and when things get rough, we just walk away. If that's the only way we understand it, as an invitation, then at the first sign of a cross or the first mention of sacrifice, we'll head the other way. And, if we only hear it as an opportunity, we miss the empowerment that comes in our baptisms to lead a new life, to genuinely and sincerely try to make a difference in this world. After all, the sign of the cross on our foreheads means we live differently in this world. We are to be Christ's cross-bearers now – powered by His Spirit.

You see, Jesus' words "follow me" are really all three and I think understanding that makes our discipleship not a burden but a *calling*. You may have to think about that for a while, and while you do, let me tell you about a little fellow who got it, who understood the meaning of discipleship. It was the most dangerous time in any worship experience for a pastor – children's sermon time. The pastor had gathered all the children up front and began by asking them if they could name the disciples for him. One little girl said, "Matthew." Another piped up, "James," and still another said, "John." One little guy whom the pastor did not know raised his hand and when called on blurted out loud enough for the Baptists to hear across the street, "Charlie." Everyone laughed, until the wise pastor looked down at him and asked him his name, and with a smile on his face he said, "Charlie." He got this discipleship thing.

AMEN.

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