

“Hard and True Words”
Luke 9:57-62

The Biblical passage before us today contains some of the most unsettling words Jesus ever spoke. It comes just after Luke tells us that Jesus had “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” That verse serves as a kind of pivot in this gospel as from that moment forward, everything points toward or occurs in the city where Jesus will die. After telling of that directional shift, Luke then recorded how a Samaritan village kept Jesus and his first disciples from entering its boundaries and it’s just after that insulting moment that the events in our passage occur.

As the group walks along, someone says to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go” and he replies, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” As they keep going, Jesus says to someone else “Follow me” and the man answers “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus responds “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Someone else overhears that conversation and offers a modified proposal: “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” To which Jesus responds with an agricultural parable about how no one who puts a hand to a plow and looks backwards “is fit for the kingdom of God.” Thus, in quick succession Luke tells of three would-be disciples. Two who volunteer and one who is asked by Jesus himself, but each of whom receive odd replies from him. What isn’t told is whether any of the three continue in that journey with Jesus. My guess is that they did not.

Instead, his responses that day remind me of the true story from years ago, when three military recruiters were addressing a group of high school seniors. The speakers--representing the Army, Navy, and Marines--had fifteen minutes total for the presentation. The Army and Navy reps got so carried away that when it was time for the Marine to speak, there were just two minutes left. Even so, he walked up to the microphone and was silent for sixty seconds, half of his time. Then he spoke. “I doubt whether there are two or three of you in this room who could even cut it in the Marine Corps. But I want to see those two or three immediately in the dining hall when we are dismissed.” He turned and sat down, but when he arrived in the dining hall, those students interested in the Marines had filled the room. (*Leadership*, Spring 1998, p. 73)

Jesus’ response to would-be disciples has something of that kind of tone to it, raising all kinds of questions about what he meant in those words. My own guess is that Jesus did not speak in that way as a kind of reverse psychology experiment, just to see how serious the men were about following him. Nor do I hear his words as a reaction to being tired or having just been rejected by the Samaritans or feeling stressed over what awaited in Jerusalem. Any of those contributing factors are certainly possible. Still, I hear him speak some hard truths about the life of a disciple both then and today, addressing not just three individuals of the past, but us as well.

Ken Bailey, a Presbyterian minister who spent decades living in the Middle East offers some helpful insights in that reflection. When the one Jesus invited to follow speaks of needing first to bury his father, it is Bailey who points out that the phrase “Let me go and bury the dead” is still spoken today in that region. It means, “Let me go and serve my father while he is alive and after he dies I will bury him and then come.” (Bailey, Kenneth E. *Through Peasant Eyes*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980, p. 26) Thus, when Jesus says “Let the dead bury their own dead,” it is not a harsh retort to a recent loss for that man, but rather a way of saying that the time for decision regarding discipleship cannot wait. Likewise, when the second volunteer says “let me first say farewell to those at my home,”—a reasonable reply to our ears—it is again Bailey who translates that what the man is really saying is “I will follow you,

Lord, but of course the authority of my father is higher than your authority and I must have his permission.” (Ibid, p. 29) Thus, Jesus’ response about a plow and the direction one is looking is a word that proclaims his authority is to be ultimate upon any disciple.

What those ancient responses from the founder of our faith reveal is that being his disciple will on occasion evoke a question about our priorities and even conflict with family or friends. It can surface when one member of a household wants to join in some church event and others do not. It can appear when half of a couple wants to make a financial commitment to the church that reflects proportionate giving and their partner resists. And it can come in those moments when, because of our faith, we refuse to join in a demeaning joke or pick on a weaker member of the group, and others call us a spoilsport or worse. Jesus is saying that to be his disciple means others won’t always be happy with us.

I’ve seen that truth in our work here as a Matthew 25 congregation. Our Session approved that designation just over three years ago, drawing from the verse in that gospel chapter where Jesus says, “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did so to me.” Our focus at DPC is on the constant work of dismantling structures that lead to racist outcomes especially as it intersects with issues of poverty. Our Matthew 25 team has provided some wonderfully creative ways to begin that work and is shaping plans now for the year ahead. I fully support that effort and our Session’s decision, but not everyone is pleased.

In some ways that isn’t a surprise as engaging in such work raises uncomfortable themes including our racist acts—conscious or not--while causing others to wonder why the church is even involved in such efforts. Yet there are also other faithful members here who have been unhappy because we aren’t going fast or far enough in that work. Such responses reflect what Jesus revealed long ago; namely, that there will be times when our efforts to follow will evoke push-back; a risk in every setting of life for those who take on the name of Christian.

Will Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, tells of a student who called him one Monday morning needing to talk. “He was in terrible shape,” Willimon recalls “having wandered around the university campus all night, crying most of the time.”

“I had the worst night of my life,” the student began. “Last night, after the fraternity meeting, we had a time when we just sit around and talk about what we did over the weekend. During a party on Saturday, I [had gone] upstairs to get something from a brother’s room and walked in on a couple who were, well [intimate]. I immediately closed the door and went back downstairs, saying nothing. When we came to the time for sharing at the end of the meeting...one in the group said, ‘I understand that Mr. Christian got a real eyeful last night.’ With that, they all began to laugh. Not a good, friendly laugh; it was a cold, cruel, mean laughter. They were saying things like, ‘You won’t see nothin’ like that in church!’ and ‘Better go confess to the priest,’ I tried to recover...say something light, but I couldn’t. They hate me! They were serious. I walked out of the meeting and stood outside and wept. I’ve never been treated like that in my life.”

“That’s amazing,” Willimon responded. “You’re not the greatest Christian in the world are you? You don’t know the Bible that well...[or] much theology.” “I don’t know anything,” the student answered. “And yet,” he went on “even a Christian like you, in the right environment, can be recognized as a threat, can be persecuted. You are young. You don’t know that much about church history. There was a time when to be a martyr, a witness, you had to be good at preaching, had to be some sort of a saint. These days, even a guy like you can be a witness, in the right hands.” (Willimon, William. *Pastor*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 259-260).

Jesus wasn’t suggesting to three men long ago who considered joining his cause that every moment as a disciple would involve hardship. While some of here this morning can recall

occasions when living out our faith created tension, I suspect many more of us would think first of the blessing that has come in being part of a body of faith--a sense of peace and community, strength through prayer and times of fellowship, the joy of joining hands to help hurting ones or moments when a song offered in praise stirred our soul. Such occasions occur far more frequently in this journey of faith which is why we call it *good* news.

Yet in a first-century conversation on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus was clear in declaring that there will be moments as a disciple when the way is not easy and when being faithful will result in conflict. And instead of being side-tracked by such occasions or feeling that we must have missed the fine print as to what it means to be one of his disciples, to accept the fact that resistance from others as to our priorities or choices will always be part of it.

Like many of you, I have followed the pageantry of events since the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the longest-reigning monarch in British history. Among the many accolades shared along the way was a clear reminder that she was a devout Christian. I suspect that some of the criticisms she faced over her 96 years grew out of how she acted upon those convictions.

Still, my favorite story that has emerged since her passing recalls a chance encounter with two American tourists. It occurred about fifteen years ago as the Queen was out for a walk in the countryside near Balmoral Castle in Scotland accompanied only by Richard Giffen, a Royal Protection Officer. It is he who shared the story.

“Normally on these [walks] you see no one,” Giffen began, “but there were two hikers coming toward us and the Queen would always stop and say ‘hello.’ It turned out it was two Americans on a walking holiday and it was clear from the moment we stopped that they hadn’t recognized the Queen which was alright. The American gentleman was telling the Queen where they were from and where they were going next and where they had been in Britain and I could see it coming, as he said to Her Majesty, ‘And where do you live?’ ‘I live in London,’ she says ‘but I have a little holiday home just on the other side of the hills.’ ‘How often have you been coming up here?’ he continued. ‘Oh, since I was a little girl. So over eighty years.’”

“You could see the wheels turning,” Giffen continued as the American then said, ‘Well, if you’ve been coming up here, you must have met the Queen.’ And she says ‘Well, I haven’t, but Dick here meets her regularly.’ So the guy says to me ‘You’ve met the Queen? What’s she like?’ Because I was with her a long time,“ Giffen explained, “I knew I could pull her leg so I said ‘Oh, she can be very cantankerous at times, but she’s got a lovely sense of humor.’ The next thing I knew, this guy comes around, puts his arm around my shoulder and before I could see what was happening gets his camera and gives it to the Queen and says ‘Can you take a picture?’

“We took a picture,” Giffen concluded “and never let on and then waved goodbye as her Majesty says to me ‘I’d love to be a fly on the wall when he shows those photographs to his friends in America when hopefully someone tells him who I am.’”

Our service to Jesus will likely never include a moment quite like that, but on a day long ago he did say that we should not be surprised if our efforts in the year ahead create tension with our family or friends, or among fellow believers. Yet even with that possibility, our Savior wants us to remain engaged in that vital work of seeking and acting upon his will to the best of our imperfect ability, all in such a way that to friends and strangers, fellow members and the occasional tourist, as we strive to reveal who he is.