

July 13th message

Once in a while some detail in scripture really stands out to me. This was the case when I started studying today's passage in Luke. Most Bibles say 'determined' when speaking of Jesus deciding it was time to go to Jerusalem. Others say 'resolutely set out for', or 'made up His mind.' But the one that really struck me is 'fixed His face' as found in a few versions. While they all mean basically the same thing, I found 'fixed his face to go to Jerusalem' the most intriguing.

All of us have been in situations or discussions where we can relate to this phrase. A subject or cause comes up that we feel very strongly about and next thing we know a determination or can be seen by all in our body language including our posture, voice, and face. In this reading Jesus knew it was time to go to Jerusalem and face His persecution and death. Later in our reading we have three brief encounters that tell us much about the cost of discipleship that Jesus often displayed. But first we have this account of a Samaritan village that refuses to help these travelers.

The direct way from Galilee to Jerusalem led through Samaria, but most Jews avoided it. The history goes back centuries. After Assyria defeated Israel, the northern kingdom, around 700 B.C. they resettled it with their own people. Over the years a mixed race of developed. 'True' or 'purebred' Jews hated what they called 'half breeds' or Samaritans and vice versa. For Jesus to take that way to Jerusalem was unusual and to ask for hospitality was even more unusual. This was an attempt to extend a hand of friendship to a sworn enemy. Not only was the hospitality refused but the offer of perhaps some type of positive interaction was lost. James and John want permission to imitate the prophet Elijah and "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the people of that village. But we're told that Jesus "rebuked them."

This incident teaches us much about our Lord. Some versions record how He says, "The Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

On a side note we see so much hate in our world. These words and actions of Jesus are so desperately needed today. While we may not be able to do much about it on a national or global level, we do need to recognize it and do our best with God's help not to let hate take root in our lives. We may disagree with others on many issues but our faith teaches us not to allow differences to fester hatred towards those we have differences with. Abraham Lincoln was frequently criticized for being too gracious to his enemies and is quoted as saying, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Then we have our three quick encounters with three would be disciples. Even though we're already into the message a bit, this is the perfect opportunity for a pastor to have the classic 3 point sermon. I guess one time there was a pastor well known for these. A visitor came one Sunday that was not used to the length of this preacher's sermon, so he leaned over to the person next to him and asked, "Is he still on point 1?"

The first encounter sounds wonderful, "I will follow you wherever you go." What organization including a church wouldn't love to hear that from a prospective member? Often we don't emphasize the commitment that one needs to be a follower of Christ. Oops, I said a bad word, commitment. Being a follower of Christ is one of the biggest commitments one can make, maybe we've never thought of it that way, but it is.

Jesus makes it very clear how one must be willing to count the cost before one commits to following Him. He is not the way to comfort or success in the world. The discipleship Jesus calls for means that following Him is to come first. It's a call for total commitment to the kingdom of God, not a responsibility that only goes part of the way. Being a disciple of Jesus means that we are to strive to live a life that follows what He taught knowing that this commitment may alienate us from what is acceptable in certain circles and ways of life. We are in essence to set our face on imitating Him.

The next would be disciple's request sounds fair enough. Many would take a quick look at Jesus' response and conclude that He is being too harsh. While we will never know if the man's father was deceased or not, there is the possibility that the man was speaking of his obligations to his father. Some Bible scholars have even concluded he wanted to follow Jesus after his father died which could be an undetermined amount of time. Jesus is not telling the man to forsake his family duties. Rather He emphasizes how the man needs to leave his spiritually dead surroundings now and get to work proclaiming the good news. Basically this guy was making an excuse not to follow Jesus at that moment.

All of us are familiar with excuses. I think of some I make from time to time. And yes some are valid, but some are just a way of putting things off. The old saying, 'Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow' can apply often in our lives. I guess once there was a little boy named Johnny who didn't like to do his homework and he tried every excuse he could. One day he thought he had really come up with a good one. So as usual the teacher asked, "Where is your homework today, Johnny?" "My dog really loves cake, he ate it." "What does your homework have to do with cake," retorted the teacher. "Well, yesterday you said the homework was a piece of cake...."

Jesus is telling this man to get on board now and not put off the work of the kingdom. This was the perfect opportunity for this guy to leave his unfulfilled life and become a disciple. And of course there is a lesson for us. Simply stated we also must not put off the work Jesus has in store for us. We are tempted to make excuses for not doing what the Lord sends our way. It can be inconvenient, it can be risky, and it will involve full commitment.

Once I read about a famous Hollywood couple that had been together for over thirty years. They are both well-established actors who are quite popular. The article emphasized how happy they are in their relationship and see no reason to get married. It's just a piece of paper the article said. I just shake my head at such a statement, no it's not just a piece of paper, it's a commitment to each other and it's a statement to others that you will stick with each other for richer or

poorer, in sickness and in health and the such. But what really concerns me is now young people hear of this and conclude living together without getting married is okay.

Perhaps you've heard that Catholic nuns and sisters are often described as being "married to Jesus" in a spiritual sense. This refers to their total commitment and devotion to Christ, symbolized by their vows. They dedicate their lives to serving God and the Church, viewing themselves as brides of Christ.

We can look at this example and learn from it. We need to recognize how there is a cost to following Jesus. Tough decisions will have to be made, priorities are different than others and the goals of the kingdom will have to be put first.

And then we get to the last person. Again, on the surface this seems like a reasonable request. In my study of this passage some spoke of how this person is not willing to put following Jesus first in his life. In going back and saying good-bye may be a hint of him telling how he is not sure of his choice. Jesus senses this and relates how one cannot look behind him when plowing a field in those days. While we may be to relate this a bit, I'm guessing it's been a long time since any of us has used a plow, but I think we understand what Jesus is saying. In those days a man walked behind a single plow most likely pulled by an ox. Jesus uses imagery of plowing to remind the people of the importance of looking forward toward a new future. If you look back, your path will swerve. The furrows won't be straight, so you must always look forward. This is His way of saying some things have to be left behind and one must look forward towards Him.

I look at what Luke records here with these three. There is a sense of finality but we can't be certain about that. People do have second thoughts, and sometimes they realize that they made the wrong decision about an important matter. That wrong decision may be irreversible, but that's not always the case.

Sometimes we do get second chances. And nothing in scripture says that a person gets only one opportunity to start following Christ. So we don't really know how the stories of any of those three people ended.

Like many stories in the Bible, this one is open ended. We're not just left wondering what happened to these folks. Instead we are invited to apply these stories to our lives.

So this morning let us conclude by little closer look at the end of verse 60. We see a phrase often missed after the second man, yet it speaks to us, "As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Following Jesus means seizing the opportunities that come our way. They may be quite obvious or just a hint of how we can serve, but nevertheless we all get them. Will we waver in our commitment; will we make excuses, or be reluctant to heed the call? Let us pray for the opposite and for God's help as we go forward. Amen.