

Pastor's Message – 6/26/2022
Luke 9:51-62

It may be just because I have been called to be a United Methodist pastor, but there is a verse in our Bible reading for today that has always grabbed me, “Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.” That tells me that as a follower of Jesus, I go where he goes. And that means, as a United Methodist pastor, I go where the Bishop tells me to go.

I was talking to a Church member after worship last week, talking about disaffiliation and pastoral changes and United Methodist processes. We were talking specifically about the United Methodist system for matching pastors and churches in the United Methodist Church which is called itineracy. Basically, the Bishop matches pastors from the available pool of pastors and churches depending on the gifts and graces of the pastor and the needs and specific personalities of the church. So, it is essential for the Staff-Parish Relations Committees of the Church to communicate well what kind of pastor they need to do the work of that particular church. And then pastors are sent to partner with that church.

Other denominations have call systems and, in those types of systems, each church is responsible for finding its own pastor. They have to research education and do background checks and all the other things that finding an employee entails. That can be a long and arduous process and can sometimes take months or even years.

It used to be that United Methodist appointments were 1 or 2 years at the most, but in recent days, appointments have been getting much longer. We are still appointed year to year, often to the same place, but now appointments are more in the 5 – 8 year range. That helps pastors and churches to work together better.

That's the reality of a pastoral call, but in the Bible reading today, Jesus isn't just calling pastors, he's calling everybody. One says, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Then, Jesus says to another potential disciple, “Follow me.” But the man says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (v. 59). That seems like a reasonable request, doesn't it? A good next step. After all, the Ten Commandments say, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

But Jesus says, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). The grieving man doesn't know how to respond, so he drops out of the crowd — possibly to take care of the funeral arrangements.

Finally, another potential follower says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home" (v. 61). Again, a reasonable and respectful request: A quick good-bye to the family, so they won't think that their loved one has disappeared.

But Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (v. 62). The request of the final follower is immediately denied.

The first man envisions a place to rest. The second assumes he will be able to bury his father. The third is anticipating a chance to say good-bye to his family. They seem like reasonable expectations. So why does Jesus consider them to be problematic?

All three of these potential disciples fail to see that a future with Jesus is very different from the past. They cannot imagine a time in which they don't have a bed to sleep in, or the opportunity to go to a funeral, or the chance to visit with their family.

Jesus reacts to those who want to follow him but are not ready to give up their attachment to the life they are already living. Who among us cannot identify with these people? One of them only wanted to say goodbye to family. Jesus' response seems harsh, but he's essentially saying, "You're either with me, or you're not."

In the second story of our two Bible readings today, as Jesus moved along, he called people to follow him. Each person said they would follow Jesus but each one had a good excuse of why they could not follow him at that time. One person said he had to bury his father first. Another said he had to say farewell to his friends and neighbors. Does discipleship demand that we ignore our familial responsibilities? No. The point here is that following Jesus is a demanding thing. Discipleship reaches into our feelings and into our families. No part of life can be left out.

Jesus was talking about priorities and commitments. Jesus was talking about deciding what is the main thing when he told these would-be disciples to put him first over whatever else was clamoring for their attention. And elsewhere, Jesus said the same thing in other words: "But strive *first* for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e., the necessities of life] will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

The trouble is, when trying to apply this story to our own lives, we find it's not always easy to translate to something concrete. We don't want to be one of the "buts"; we want to be among those who say to Jesus, "Yes, I'll follow you now and always." But if we make that decision, what does it actually *mean*?

Jesus calls everyone, as we sang in our Opening Hymn, “o’er the tumult of our life’s wide, restless sea,” ... “saying, “Christian, follow me!” Jesus calls everyone to follow him and some follow in the context of one church or another. Some decide to become members of one church or another and then, some fail to live out that decision and fade away, sometimes never to be heard from again. That can be discouraging for the remaining members who continue to live out their call and it hurts the church to lose that engagement and the gifts and graces that those church members have been given to share.

It has been a while now, but I remember, and perhaps you do, too, the shootings at Columbine High School. One of the victims was asked if she was a Christian and was then killed for her answer. I wonder if that is easier than living out a life of faith, day by day and year to year?

One blogger, who identifies herself only by the title of her blog, "Grace for the Road," wrote that the Sunday school advice to "put Jesus first" lulled her into a "blissful spiritual sleep." She added, "I thought it was a one-time decision. Will I put Jesus first? Yes. I will. So, what did I think I meant? ... I'm a Christian, I live in a way I think would be generally pleasing to God, and if someone put a gun to my head and told me I had to renounce my faith or die, I'd choose to die."

Sharks are one of the oldest, most primitive, and most successful vertebrate groups still in existence today. But in order for a shark to keep breathing, keep oxygenating water flowing through its gills, a shark must keep moving all the time. The gill slits on a shark lack the fluttering fins found in the bony fishes that work to constantly direct a stream of water over the gills. Sharks must invest their whole body in order to move oxygen through their system and so stay alive.

A few weeks ago, I attended a Zoom prayer meeting for District Clergy wherein the Bible passage for the day was from the gospel of Luke where the angel comes to Mary and tells her that she will be the mother of the Messiah. She asks, understandably, “How can that be?” We know that she says “Yes,” and the world is saved, but she has no idea what that “Yes” will mean. I had the thought and made the comment, “Do any of us really know what a commitment to Jesus really means?”

There is a scene in the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when the intrepid archaeologist/adventurer is fleeing one enemy or another and comes to the edge of a huge and yawning chasm. He stops his forward progress just in the nick of time and teeters there, about to fall in. Then he rights himself and surveys his situation.

He can't go back; danger lurks there. Yet it seems just as impossible to go forward, for that would mean certain death. Then Jones reaches down and

picks up a handful of gravel. He throws it out ahead of him over the cliff. The falling stones don't travel far. Just a few inches below the level of his boots, they land on an invisible footbridge he never knew was there.

That's not a bad image for the road of faith and a decision to follow Jesus. Where there seems to be no discernible road ahead, God reveals one. Every decision of faith is an investment in the future.

But what kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make? What kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make in your children? What kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make in your spouse? What kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make in the arts? What kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make in friends? What kind of payoff do you look for from the investment you make in your church?

Are we willing to turn our backs on comfort and duty and family in order to follow Jesus on the path to the kingdom of God? If this sounds like a relationship that involves nothing but pain and suffering and sacrifice, then the answer might be, "No. I don't want to get into this. I'd rather be alone."

Is our purpose in life to find happiness in this life? Is that the promise of following Jesus? What Jesus is offering us is a life of intense happiness, deep fulfillment, and unending love. It's just that he needs to put us through a rather serious screening to see if we're serious about this kind of relationship with him.

Today's Bible reading teaches that happiness will come if we are compatible with Jesus in several important ways. First, we need to share his determination to travel to Jerusalem, and this means seeing our final goal as resurrection life with God. If we focus entirely on Wall Street or Capitol Hill or Silicon Valley or Hollywood, if we end up putting all our passion into places that promise us money or power or fame, then we will find ourselves falling out of relationship with Jesus. It is only by traveling with him to Jerusalem, and moving with him through sacrifice to new life, that we will discover our deepest fulfillment as human beings.

Disciples are called to walk along new paths and walk on the most traveled roads of this world; disciples are called to walk on and out into the unknown future. A disciple always keeps eyes forward, fixed on, and believing the promises of the kingdom of God. Believers know the final end; we just don't know what lies between here and there.

Jesus calls us to "shark faith." It is a faith that keeps moving, with eyes always fixed on the final destination. It is a faith that swims in the life-giving water of the promise of Jesus.