

Now and But First

King of Glory Lutheran Church

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Year C: Pentecost 3: Luke 9:51-62

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⁵¹When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶²Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Now and But First: Jesus is ready to go to the cross to embrace sin and death for all of us. This is His mission, this is His call. We often miss that radical love and make excuses why we cannot follow Him in our lives. When perhaps we think of it in human terms, His insistence makes more sense.

Jesus had set God before Himself. He was ready to go to Jerusalem to embrace the cross for all of us. As the text says, 'His face was set.' And in short the text says, "Follow me now! No excuses! None. Let's get to it!"

Jesus response is God's dramatic, powerful, and non-negotiable call upon our lives. Jesus asked us to follow and be devoted to Him and only Him.

Thus, I could say Jesus demands everything we have. He has given everything for us and demands the same from us. Jesus asks us to leave everything comfortable in this life to sacrifice loving Him and loving the world for His sake. Jesus asks us to leave father and mother house and spouse to follow him to love him to serve him all of our days. I could say all of those things and they are true.

For does not the Bible say, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart with all your soul with all your strength and with all your mind?" The first commandment God gave: "You shall have no other Gods besides me." (Exodus 20:3)

In today's text, there is a harshness, if I might use that word behind Jesus' tone. He asks someone to follow Him and the person responds, "But first..." One man is ready to hit the trail, "But first I need to go home and bury a loved one." And for that faithful Jew, burying a loved one was Scriptural command to keep. "No." Jesus replies. "No, but firsts!" Jesus has only one wish for would be followers...now! Why is Jesus so insistent that there are no 'But firsts!'?

It's good to be reminded of all God asks us to do in order to be faithful followers. Maybe this in itself is a wake-up call of sorts. And I'm hesitant to reduce the level of insistence of Jesus' words to us. After all, He is headed to the cross to die for our sins out of love. If that isn't a message that makes us wake up then we better take a look at our own complacency!

I don't know about you, but I've never been a strong believer in motivation by way of harshness. It likely works in the military where strength is demanded and obeying orders is critical for mission success. But for others, not so much. The boss puts a sign in the staff lounge stating a new policy that no employee has been able to give input. People might go along because they have to, yet their internal motivation to follow or obey or be obedient is lessened by an external harsher reality.

Lutherans believe in Law and Gospel being two sides of one coin. The law shows us where we fall short and the good news shows as God's grace. The truth is, none of us will ever live up to following Jesus with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Yet, God's grace forgives. So where do we put Jesus' words, "Now! No but firsts!"

We Lutherans believe in "both and" not "either or's". So I want to argue that if we could feel Jesus' insistence, then that might be a better motivator to follow Him. This would be better than a morality sermon that simply says, "We better follow Jesus."

I've heard pastors rank a personal relationship with God with other life callings. One said: Church, God, family.
Another said: God, family, church.
Another said: Family, God, church.

If you could rank, your personal faith, your family, and your work, where would you put them? Following Jesus looks different for all of us.

So perhaps let's flip this text on its side. Just maybe rotate it a 30° angle and see what looks different. If strictness and harshness to follow Jesus doesn't motivate what will?

Remember the words of 1 John? "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." It continues, "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:7, 12)

Bring into your mind someone that you love very much. Now think about the ways that you have sacrificed or demonstrated your love for that person.

What does it look like?

You put a ring on your spouse or partner's finger promising through thick and thin, good and bad, tears and laughter, you made a covenant for life. That's Jesus' kind of love. You stayed up late changing diapers? You went the extra mile and did something unexpected just because you knew it would make the other person so deliciously happy? That's Jesus' kind of love. You bought that extra special Christmas gift or a birthday present. It stretched the budget – but when there was enough money in the bank and you knew you could pay for that item because it would make their heart sing, you did it!

Are you with me? Do you see where I'm going? It's this kind of radical love that we have for one another that Jesus longs for and in fact created us to have with God! Let me say it again. It is this kind of radical love that goes above and beyond any call of duty ... it is this kind of love that Jesus longs for with us. This is why there is urgency! This is why the first commandment is to love the Lord your God above everything else! God knows that this relationship (pointing up and down) satisfies our soul in ways that nothing else can!

Jesus said to the would-be follower, "You don't need to go back and say goodbye to your family, I am your family!" Little did Jesus know that nowadays we would just send a quick text, "going to be away for a while Dad! But I'll send pictures!"

If we think about the love that motivates us to talk to someone every day or to wake up wondering how we can make them feel better, to go the extra mile to cherish that covenantal promise; that's the kind of life that Jesus desires us to have! And we have it in Jesus.

So now if we rotate Jesus' words back just that 30° back to its original space perhaps the urgency and radical claim Jesus has on our lives doesn't sound so harsh.

“Follow me now, because I am all you need and want. Follow me now because I'm going to die for you and you need to see this. Follow me now and I will take your spirit to places you never dreamed you could go. Follow me now. No ‘but first's!’

In Joseph Girzone's book “Joshua: A Parable for Today” Jesus comes to live in a small town as a wood carver. He is called Joshua and travels to many different denominations on Sunday mornings, and even creates a radical carving of Moses for a local synagogue. This has people confused about who he is and what he believes.

Of course they are attracted to Joshua because He has a certain simplicity and depth about him which is attractive. They ask Him questions about God and religion. One evening at a dinner party, Joshua gets on a roll. “God never intended that religion become what it is today. Jesus came to earth to try to free people from that kind of regimented religion where people are threatened if they don't obey rules and rituals invented by the clergy.” (Pg. 73)

“True religion comes from the heart. It is a deep relationship with God, and should bring peace and joy and love to people, not fear and guilt and meanness...Nor is God honored by subservient obedience to religious laws devoid of love. God is pleased only by the free expression of the soul that truly loves him. Anything less is counterfeit and serves only the short-term needs of religious institutions.” (Pg. 75)

For Jesus, there were no ‘but if's.’ He knew the love of humankind was propelling Him towards the ultimate sacrifice. What a gift for us! May we learn to love God so that there are less and less ‘but if's’ and more and more ‘now!’ every day.
Amen.

Joseph Girzone. Joshua: A Parable for Today. Touchstone. Simon & Schuster. 1987.