

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 9:51-62
Intern Pastor Ken Staib

Back before I entered seminary, I worked as a construction estimator. Most of my workday was spent looking through drawings and preparing bids on projects, all with the goal of being the low bidder. On those occasions when I *was* the low bidder, the next part of my job was to order materials for the project. Before I handed off a project to a project manager, I had to write several orders for materials. It was often up to me to make sure the initial material deliveries arrived at the jobsite *on time*. If not, I heard about it.

There were many mornings when I arrived at the office only to be greeted by a voice mail from an irritated jobsite superintendent. “Ken, this is Dan. That delivery of rebar didn’t show up this morning. I’ve got concrete trucks coming this afternoon to pour those foundations. Call me back.” There were also many calls during the day. “Ken, this is Fred. Where is that brick you ordered? You said it would be here today, but it’s not. I’m going to have to send 12 bricklayers home.” One thing that was common to all of these phone calls was a sense of urgency. When I received such a phone call, it was already too late. And the superintendents did *not* want to hear any excuses, *even if it wasn’t my fault*. No excuses, just get the material here now.

Today’s gospel is about excuses, excuses in response to something urgent; in this case, the urgent call of Jesus. This passage comes at the beginning of Luke’s “travel narrative.” This narrative, which spans ten chapters, describes how Jesus makes his way from Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, where he will die. We hear that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” He is a man on a mission. Nothing will distract Jesus from this journey. His face is pointed forward, not backward.

The journey does not start off very well, however, as he ventures through hostile Samaritan territory. He encounters rejection in the first village he comes to. As he moves on to

the *next* village, Jesus encounters three people along the road, and converses with them about what it means to follow him.

The first man tells Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go,” to which Jesus replies that in order to do so you will not have a permanent place to sleep ever again. Following Jesus means always being on the move.

Jesus invites the second man to follow him, to which the second man replies that he has a family obligation to fulfill, the burial of his father. Here, Jesus gives a startling response, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” In other words, this is *serious* business. Then Jesus tells him what to do instead, “Go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Following Jesus is more urgent and more important than even family obligations.

The third man tells Jesus he will follow him, but first he wants to say farewell to his family. Here Jesus responds, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Following Jesus means looking ahead not behind, moving forward not backward.

These were difficult words for the three men along the road. Jesus seems to make no accommodation for *their* priorities. He seems to brush these off as mere excuses that are getting in the way of following him and proclaiming the kingdom of God. These are also difficult words for us. Jesus is calling us to focus on one thing – the kingdom of God – no excuses, no distractions. We *might* say such focus is unrealistic, maybe impossible.

However, I am aware that I have at times approached things with such single-mindedness. I think of high school when I played piano for musicals. For the last two weeks leading up to the performance, my life was consumed by whatever show we were doing, even to the point of having dreams about songs or scenes in the show. Short of serious illness, there were *no excuses* for not showing up. I think of my estimating career, how I worked twelve hour

days sometimes to put together a bid. During those times I was focused on one thing – putting together a competitive bid. There were *no excuses*. I had to get the work done. I had to turn in a good bid or risk losing my job.

I can think of other examples I've seen in people. I know people who spend many hours training, exercising, and practicing for team sports or individual athletic contests. Their life becomes their sport, and there are *no excuses* for not putting in the necessary time and effort. I know people who spend countless hours building or remodeling their own home, putting aside other activities for weeks or months at a time. There are *no excuses* for not finishing. I know people who set commit themselves to starting a business, an endeavor that has no down time and *no room for excuses*.

I say all this not to be critical, because all these things *can* be worthwhile pursuits. What I want to point out is that we human beings are capable of high levels of commitment. We are capable of putting aside excuses and focusing on a single goal. When we put our mind to it, we are able to devote our lives completely to family, work, sports, music, hobbies, and homes. However, I would also say that this same commitment is sometimes lacking when it comes to following the urgent call of Jesus.

When it comes to following Jesus, we have many excuses: I don't have enough time; I don't have not enough energy; I don't know how to go about it; I don't want to be vulnerable; I don't want to change; I just can't do it. I know many of these excuses well, because I have used them. In one of the most life-changing decisions of my life, following God's call to become a pastor, I went through a few of these excuses. I am sure the same thing has happened to many of you, as Jesus has called you to new ministries, new spiritual practices, or new ways of living.

It is easy to make excuses because Jesus' call is difficult, and we would rather not commit to it. To proclaim the kingdom of God is not a short term goal that we commit to and

complete, like taking a class, playing on the football team, or preparing for a recital. In fact it is not even a *long term* goal, like a career or business. *It is not a goal at all.* It is a new way of living, a new way of thinking, a new outlook on life. *Jesus is urging us on* to a commitment beyond ourselves, a commitment that changes us.

Jesus' call is difficult because it requires us to go beyond ourselves. It might require us to give up some of our comfort, or adjust our priorities, not just for a few months, or even a few years, but for the rest of our lives. When Jesus says, "Follow me," and we say, "Yes," there is no turning back.

And unlike playing on a team, or preparing for a performance, or achieving career goals, the call to follow Jesus is not something we can accomplish *on our own*. It is no longer about *us*, and what *we* can achieve. We can push our bodies or our minds to accomplish many things, but following Jesus is not one of them. Following Jesus means putting our trust in him, and the good news is that Jesus will be walking right there with us, *especially* when the road is most difficult.

The call to follow Jesus is difficult because we are called to let go. We are called to trust in someone other than ourselves. We are called to trust in more than our family, career, or talents. Yes these are all important, but no longer are they the *most* important. We can no longer completely rely on them. We are called to trust that not only does Jesus urge us on, but that God will give us what we need for the journey.

The call to follow Jesus usually takes us outside our comfort zones. Sometimes it takes us *way beyond* our comfort zones. But as difficult as it can be to do that, it can also be incredibly freeing. In fact, it can be wildly exhilarating! A life of following Jesus frees us, which is what Paul writes about in today's passage from Galatians. Paul writes that when we follow Jesus we find freedom, *not* the freedom to do whatever we want, but the freedom to love our neighbor.

And though loving our neighbor seems scary or difficult at first, suddenly you find that it isn't so

bad, and if you're honest with yourself you find it to be fulfilling, even exciting. Of course following Jesus is not just about feeling good about ourselves, but there *is* something about following Jesus and loving your neighbor that is life-giving *and* life-changing. And it becomes more than just another thing *to do*. It becomes a part of us.

Yes, it is scary at first. For some of you it might have been a little scary the first time you spent the night at the church for Family Promise. For some of you it might have been a little scary the first time you went on a mission trip to another state or another country. For some of you it might have been a little scary to retire from your job, or quit your job to try something new. For some of you it might have been a little scary to tell a family member you can't live this way and you're leaving. But I'm sure when you look back at those moments when you stopped making excuses, said "yes" to Jesus' call, and trusted in God instead of yourself, you realize how freeing those experiences were. You realize that not only did you survive, but you also thrived. You realize that you were transformed, and given a new perspective.

But none of this is easy. I struggle with this every day, as I am sure you do. It is easier to make excuses than to follow Jesus' call. The three men along the road were faced with a call that was not easy. When Jesus set his face to go towards Jerusalem, he was going down a path that was not easy. He was going down a path that would ultimately lead to his death. But the path to Jerusalem would also lead to new life. Jesus died in Jerusalem, but he was also raised there. The path that led to death became the path to new life. The path to new life is *free of excuses*, but *full of the grace of God*. So leave behind the excuses, and trust the one who is urging us on. Amen.