

June 27, 2004

"Grace Works"

Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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For three years they followed Jesus. They listened to him, watched him, learned from him. It was the best of times.

Suddenly, it seemed, he changed. Luke puts it dramatically, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

We know what awaits him there. He knew what lay at the end of the journey. The disciples didn't know. What they did know was that Jesus seemed different. Mark reports that Jesus walked out ahead of the disciples and they followed at a distance – afraid.

The leisurely days in Galilee were past. Jesus moved with urgency, some sense of necessity seemed to press him on. The time was drawing near.

And, on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus sent some of the disciples ahead to prepare the villages for his coming. They were an advance team telling people Jesus was coming. "Get ready. God is on the move. This may be your last chance."

Jesus was beginning to transfer his ministry to the community. In the next chapter of Luke, Jesus sent 72 disciples out to proclaim the good news, heal the sick and turn back demonic powers. They went and they did what Jesus did. The power of the kingdom of God went with them.

The next chapters of Luke are rich with teaching about discipleship. Jesus urgently prepared his men and women for the new journey they'd soon take – after the cross.

The journey to Jerusalem was south. Samaria lay in between. Most Jews avoided the direct route through Samaria. They took the long way around to avoid it. Jews and Samaritans detested each other. Their hatred was racial, religious and political. It was something like Israelis and Palestinians today minus the bombs, guns and violence.

That was a real challenge to Jesus' disciples. It's not easy to offer God's mercy to people you are convinced are God's enemies – and yours! How do you proclaim good news from God to God's enemies – and yours?

Imagine walking into Samaritan village filled with people you detest, knowing they hate you, too. "Good news from God," you shout out. "God is about to include you in the greatest act of salvation the world will ever know. God is about to forgive your sins, heal your diseases and accept you as full members of the kingdom of God." It would be tough to say it and mean it.

The Samaritans were equally challenged. They simply refused to accept or hear the messengers of Jesus. They were Jews on the way to Jerusalem. Lock the doors and protect your loved ones.

Well, imagine that! There's nothing quite like knowing you are superior to people then have them treat you as inferior. "You give these low-life Samaritans a break and how do they respond? They reject you. What God-forsaken, wretched people. Damn them all!"

Two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, decided to do something about it. Previously, Jesus nicknamed them "Sons of Thunder" and they're about to show why.

"Jesus," they said, "should we call down fire from heaven and kill all these dirty Samaritans?" And why not? After all, Jesus' cause is just and holy and the Samaritans trampled on it. They deserve judgment.

We're always tempted to use violence to accomplish what we think are holy and just ends. It's easier now than back in Jesus' time. James and John incorrectly assumed they could call down fire from heaven. Today, just strap a bomb on your body, booby-trap a car – or call in the B52s or some laser guided rockets. Boom! The bad guys are dead. Thank God.

Jesus turned to James and John and rebuked them – and us. If we think the kingdom of God is established by conventional human means of power, we've missed everything Jesus came to say and do. Or, as Jesus puts it later in Luke, "Those who live by the sword die by the sword." Violence breeds violence. God's shalom cannot come by means of human forms of power.

Lesson #1 on discipleship – following Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples pressed on to the next village. Maybe they would receive the messengers. Along the way, someone ran up to Jesus and said, "I'll follow you."

Now that seems like Jesus' dreams come true. For years he's been calling for people to follow him. Here's a volunteer for the kingdom of God!

Instead of joyous acceptance, Jesus offered a challenge. "Do you know what following me means? I don't have a place to live. Follow me and your future is uncertain. There are no guarantees. A cross awaits me. What about you?"

To another person, Jesus called, "Follow me."

This man answered, "Wait until I bury my father, then I'll follow you."

Jesus reply is famous, "Let the dead bury the dead. You go preach the good news of the kingdom."

A third person offered another excuse. "I have to say good-bye to my family; set things in order back home."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts their hand to the plow and turns back is fit for the kingdom of God."

That's not what we expect from Jesus. These are some of the most difficult sayings of Jesus in the Gospels. I suspect they reflect the urgency of the moment in Jesus' life. He was on his way to suffer and die. His followers could expect the same. Following Jesus was not about finding fulfillment or achieving the good life.

At the least, Jesus teaches here and elsewhere that following him is costly. The cost is ultimate. The kingdom of God comes first. Period. Being a Christian costs us our lives. We are not our own. Jesus' claims on us is total.

Fred Craddock, commenting on this passage, notes, "Jesus does not ask us to choose him over the Devil, but to choose him over our family." That's tough.

And it raises important questions for the 21st century church, doesn't it?

William Willimon, Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, was once a parish pastor in Greenville, South Carolina. He was young and ambitious and devised a plan for the church to grow. They organized a door-to-door visitation campaign in the neighborhood around the church. The goal was to get people to come to church so they might become followers of Jesus.

The program worked. New people came to church. Some became Christians. The church grew. After six months they had an evaluation session and applauded themselves for a job well done.

Then, Willimon recalls, a woman named Gladys stood to speak. "Something is bothering me. We've got people to come to church by telling them about our church programs, our inspiring worship, our strong preaching, our great Sunday School and youth ministry. We've told them we'll meet their needs. And some have accepted Christ as Savior."

Willimon interrupted. "What's bothering you about that? Aren't we supposed to meet people's needs?"

Gladys replied, "Somewhere I remember it saying, 'Take up your cross and follow me.'"

"And we were silent," Willimon says.

Can we with integrity call people to faith in Jesus Christ by appealing to their self-interest, meeting their needs, then later tell them what Jesus says about the cost of discipleship? Jesus promised people a very difficult time if they followed him. Authentic Christian teaching must tell the whole truth. Being a disciple of Jesus costs us everything.

Now I don't know exactly how to make this text "fit" modern American life-styles. I do know you cannot spin this text into some comfortable, easier form of religious commitment. It's not compatible with most popular forms of American Christianity.

But I also know that most of you in this room are followers of Jesus and you want to do the right thing. You want to be an authentic disciple of Jesus. You are here listening carefully to his word today.

Maybe the Epistle text can help us. It's one apostle's reflection on being a disciple of Jesus a generation after the cross.

"For freedom Christ set us free," Paul begins. Whatever else following Jesus means, it's about liberation not bondage.

Freedom for Paul does not carry the modern meaning of the word. Paul does not have political or individual rights in mind. "Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" is not the freedom described in the New Testament.

Paul means that faith in Jesus Christ frees us from the bondage of achieving our own salvation by our good behavior. After all, how can you ever know if you've done enough good to offset the bad? That's tyranny.

Rather, salvation or being put right with God, is a free gift from God offered in Jesus Christ. We can't earn it or achieve it. It's given without payment.

So, Paul argues, seize that gift given in Jesus Christ. And, he goes on, that grace given has consequences. To seize Jesus Christ by faith is to be seized by that Jesus Christ and his grace.

That means Christ gives us his Spirit and his Spirit works in us toward the good life described at the end of the Epistle Text.

It's called the Fruit of the Spirit and it's a picture of an authentic experience of Christian faith. This is what grace "does" in people of faith: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

However, that "good life" is preceded by a profound decision. This is where Jesus' sayings on discipleship come in.

Did you hear Galatians 5:13, "...through love become slaves to one another." Slow down and hear that. It seems the very opposite of the freedom Paul declares in the Christian birthright. "Be slaves of one another."

You can't spin this one in a more comfortable direction either! In fact, it's Paul's explanation of what the love command means. Loving our neighbor, which is the whole law of God in a word, is putting ourselves in the service of one another.

In other words, the church is community of free slaves! That's what it means to be a covenant community. We say it regularly. 'We...do **bind** ourselves in the presence of God to walk together in all His ways....'

Did you notice that Paul didn't tell us to love God with all our being? Nor does he tell his readers to love Jesus either. He doesn't even tell us to follow Jesus. He does instruct us to be slaves to the community of disciples.

Now here is the good news I bring you today. Maybe we best hear Jesus' radical demand by living in the flesh and blood community he dares call his own body. Perhaps following Jesus is not some abstract idea to debate and define cleverly. Can it be that the **experience** of loving service in the community is where we come to understand what the ultimate commitment Jesus demands looks like. Maybe seeking the truth isn't an intellectual quest but an experience in community.

I think so. I do know for sure that if you offer your life to God by giving your life to this community of faith, nothing will ever be the same. [Including the church meeting!!]