

Sermon on Luke 9:51-62
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, June 27, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace...

Today's gospel lesson includes one of the sharpest lines of Jesus' ministry. It happened as he "set his face to go to Jerusalem" – a journey that would lead him to death on a cross, and resurrection from the dead. As they came to a town of Samaritans, the hoped-for reception in that village did not happen. The village did not receive him. But rather than punishing the villagers with "fire from heaven" as James and John suggested, Jesus led his disciples on their way down the road.

Along the road a person came up to Jesus and vowed to "follow you wherever you go." Now, what could go wrong with such dedication? Even when the Son of God would have no place to sleep on most nights – this was not a money making journey. Then to another Jesus said, "Follow me". The person agreed, but with a condition: first he wanted to go home and bury his father. It seems a reasonable request. Wouldn't a compassionate Jesus say "okay?" But, now, Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." And to another who said, "I will follow you, Lord, but first let me say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said this to him: "*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.*"

Ouch! That was a sharp remark, if ever there was one. So what did Jesus mean by that? It seems so uncharacteristic. Jesus was so consumed by the urgency of his mission – he now was on the way to Jerusalem, time was of the essence, and there was no time to dilly-dally – that no distraction, no matter how worthy it seemed, could be allowed to stand in the way. And Lord knows how many distractions we can all allow to prevent us from following Jesus. For some of us it is time with our families. Fair enough. For some it is time to finish those things we want to do at home, finish that degree, take that last vacation, or that last project. All worthy things in themselves. But Jesus is talking about the urgency of building the kingdom of God, and if he waited for every single person's "one last thing", he would never get started. He'd still be in Galilee today, waiting for his disciples to mend their nets and bury their dead.

So, what does it mean that "no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We're not farmers here, so we don't really have any experience or understanding of the metaphor. Maybe my relatives in North Dakota can help me. But they don't use plows anymore (that went out with Great-Grandpa Erlandson in the 1930s!). Now they use combines, with air-conditioning and cd players inside, all the comforts of home, and plow 100s of

acres a day. But if they turn around and look back while driving forward, they could take down a silo or the side of a barn! So I think they get this!

One of my favorite films is called *Smoke Signals*, which tells the story of two Lakota Indian friends who embark on a journey off the reservation in South Dakota to find the ashes of their cremated father in Arizona (who had just died). As they were leaving, they hitched a ride with a young woman friend of theirs, whose car would no longer drive forward in gear, only in reverse! Their friend gave them a ride from their house all the way to the border of the reservation, looking backwards out the rear window, driving in reverse down the highway. They thought nothing of it – they were used to such “handicaps” as an old, broken down car. But it reminds me of Jesus’ words, and wonder how twisted I am to make this connection!

A better connection for us with Jesus’ metaphor is how we are so easily distracted from our driving by doing other things while we drive: like eat food, comb our hair, choose a radio station or song on our cd player, or even put on make-up. One of the greatest dangers today is people talking or texting on their cell phones while driving, which has led to hundreds of crashes and deaths nationwide. So we could say, today, no one who texts on the phone while driving is fit to have a drivers license and drive in this state. It’s just too dangerous. You could also say, whoever looks only in the rear view mirror or is distracted by what is happening in the back seat of their car (like children fighting) is fit to drive. Now, do you get it?

If you and I really want to follow Jesus, we cannot allow every distraction to keep us from ever starting out. It’s easy to do, and so tempting. Did the pastor ask you to serve on the Vestry, or teach Sunday School? No, I play cards with my friends on Tuesday evenings, or that’s my bowling night, or let me raise my children to adulthood first, before I make such a commitment! (I just made those excuses up, to make my point, but they’re not that far-fetched. Actually, I’ve heard it all!). Jesus came to change the world, to give life to those who are dying (that’s all of us), and invite all who are “outcasts” in this world to have a place at God’s table of grace. This is really a tall order, not easy to do, with lots of opposition. So do you blame Jesus for being a bit frustrated at our often lame human excuses to keep from coming along and joining in this work? It’s for our own good, after all, but we’re surely not grateful for the invitation!

Actually, there’s another reason why Jesus used this image of “not looking back” when one is plowing a field. In our first lesson, God told the Old Testament prophet Elijah to anoint “Elisha son of Shaphat” as the next prophet in his place. Elijah found Elisha plowing his field, with twelve yoke of oxen. When Elijah threw the mantle of leadership over Elisha’s shoulders, Elisha said, “Wait, let me kiss my mother and father goodbye, then I will follow you.” Elijah said okay. He

then slaughtered the oxen, and gave it to the people to eat, and then Elisha followed him as his servant.

Several times Jesus himself was mistaken for Elijah the prophet. But Luke described Jesus as an even greater prophet than Elijah. Jesus was, in fact, the long-expected Messiah, no mere prophet of God. And no one who looked back, or waited first to kiss their parents goodbye, was fit to follow Jesus as Messiah. For there was no time now. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and the cross.

So, what should we say to all this today? There's nothing wrong with looking back at where you have been before embarking on a journey or a new path. In fact, it's prudent. It makes good sense, as Jesus said many times, to count the cost before going on a journey or starting a new project. He compared it to a king counted the cost before going to war. It's just a smart thing to do. So as you are contemplating discipleship and following Jesus, you should look back at your life as well as your present situation, and think long and hard. For Jesus doesn't promise that it will be easy, just that it will change your life, and actually, GIVE you life! So it may not be an easy choice to make!

But when you make it, don't say "I will follow" and then say, first "wait until I go do something else". For life is always full of distractions – we may be the most distracted society of all time here in America, with all of our cultural and media distractions! Just think of all the time we spend watching "reality tv" while avoiding the true reality of life outside our doors. Jesus is laying out for you and me an invitation to come along with him on a journey that will totally change our lives, where we go, what we do, and what we think! We will make friends out of enemies, and love God and neighbor as strongly as our own families, and we will look upon everyone as a child of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, instead of as strangers and aliens or outcasts. If that's not new and different for us, I don't know what is!

So, in the ultimate analysis, don't let anything that is secondary in this world distract you from what is truly important and life-giving! And don't let the multitude of distractions pile up and divert you from God's invitation to seek life, and have it in Christ Jesus! Even when many of these things seem important or interesting at the time. Even when they may be "good things". Instead, keep your eyes on the "true prize", the pearl of great price, which is the call of God through Jesus Christ to seek God's kingdom. For when you do, you will discover all those things you have been seeking. As the song goes, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added on to you. Alleluia!*

Don't take those sharp words of Jesus as a rebuke to make you feel guilty. Instead, Jesus said these things to shake you and me up a little, to the importance of the calling he has giving us. So when you answer Jesus' call to follow, don't look back – look ahead to the future that God is creating for you today. Amen.