

TO FOLLOW OR NOT TO FOLLOW, THAT IS THE QUESTION

by Rev. Elaine Poproski

Today's scripture passage begins really simply: When the days drew near for Jesus' return to his Father's right hand in heaven, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Returning to his home in heaven doesn't sound all that bad, except getting there meant the cross and death. Jerusalem meant pain and suffering. The next 10 chapters of Luke are all dedicated to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem – to the cross and it all starts with today's Scripture passage.

Traveling to Jerusalem meant Jesus and his disciples were going to need places to stay. So Jesus sent some of his disciples ahead of him to do things like find people to take them in and feed them. This may sound presumptuous to us, but it was the way of things in first century Israel. Hospitality was one of the most important social rules. Some of the places Jesus went, he was known, and he had friends and family to stay with. But there were other places he wasn't known so well – he wasn't received so well. The Samaritan village we read about in today's scripture passage is one such place.

One of the weird choices Jesus made when traveling from the Galilee region up at the north end of Israel, south to Jerusalem, was to travel through Samaria. It was a weird choice because Jews and Samaritans really, really disliked each other.

There were hundreds of years of animosity between the two groups.

Somewhere around 900 years before Jesus was born, Solomon was king of Israel. One of his greatest legacies was the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, the way he got it done was by conscripting labour from all the tribes. When Solomon died, ten of the twelve tribes petitioned the new king to stop the conscription. The new king refused. So the 10 tribes seceded and created their own, independent kingdom of Israel.

Their new capital city was a city called Samaria. What was left in the south became known as the kingdom of Judah.

A couple hundred years later, the Assyrian Empire was taking over the world. They invaded and decimated the northern kingdom of Israel. They drove many of its inhabitants out of their homes and sent in Assyrians to populate the cities and towns – especially the capital city of Samaria.

A hundred or so years after that, the Babylonian Empire replaced the Assyrians. In 587 BC they laid siege to Jerusalem and destroyed the city and the Temple. Like the Assyrians did in the northern kingdom, so the Babylonians did in the south. They exiled many of the Jewish people from their homes and their country. But then about 35 years later, a new Babylonian king decided to allow the exiles to return to Judah and on top of that, he provided the funds for them to rebuild their Temple.

Those who'd been left behind were thrilled. They wanted to be part of rebuilding the Temple. But the people in charge refused to let them participate. They figured those who'd been left behind had probably turned to idolatry after Babylon invaded, given that Jerusalem's priests had all been exiled. So the people went north, to Mount Gerizim, right near the old city of Samaria and built their own temple.

This is a really simplified picture of the history of things, but I wanted to share it with you because it gives us a sense of how deeply entrenched the animosity between Jews and Samaritans was.

Where the Jews valued purity, the Samaritans had intermarried with Gentiles for generations. Where the Jews revolted when the Greeks outlawed all Jewish customs 165 years before Jesus, the Samaritans negotiated peace, even offering to name their temple after a Greek deity. And then about 100 years before Jesus, the king of Judea destroyed the Samaritans' temple.

Now, here we are, in the time of Jesus. The Samaritans hate the Jews, and the Jews hate the Samaritans. It's been that way for generations. So when Jews are traveling between Galilee in the north and Jerusalem in the south, they take the long way around so they don't have to go through Samaria – so they don't run the risk of running into any Samaritans. They certainly don't stay in the homes of Samaritans. To do so would be against all God's purity laws.

But here in Luke 9 we read that Jesus sent messengers to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. He sent a couple of his Jewish disciples to find a place to stay in a Samaritan village.

Have you ever gone somewhere you weren't welcome? Have you ever stepped into a room and known, without anyone even saying anything, that you weren't wanted? I expect that's what it was like for the disciples who went to the Samaritan village. It's not really that much of a surprise that the people of this village didn't want Jesus and his disciples to stay with them. We have no reason to think they knew anything about who Jesus was. Up until now Jesus had mostly just been up north in the Galilee region. News didn't really travel between there and Samaria.

So when they find out that this Jewish teacher on his way to Jerusalem needs a place to stay, they shut their doors. They rejected him just like generations of his people had rejected them.

When James and John found out that Jesus had been rejected, they asked Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

Seems like a bit of an extreme response, don't you think? Then again, given the history between the two peoples, maybe not so extreme. I wonder if James and John were excited by the possibility of wiping out an entire Samaritan village. It would be a cleansing like God rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah. I imagine they were feeling pretty powerful; they sensed they were right in the middle of something important – something monumental. They were convinced they were on the right side and everyone else was their enemy.

But Jesus rebuked them.

We don't know exactly what words Jesus spoke. All we know is that he rebuked them and sent them on to the next village.

There's this story in the Old Testament, in 2 Kings 1, in which the king of Israel had been badly injured, so sent some messengers to the temple of one of the Philistine gods to find out if he would recover from his injury. Those messengers were intercepted by the prophet Elijah, who sent them back to the king, rebuking him for seeking out some other god besides Israel's God, and telling him that his injury would kill him. Three times the king sent 50 soldiers to try to get

Elijah to come to him. The first two times, Elijah called fire from heaven to consume them all. Only the third time did Elijah finally agree to go.

Probably James and John were thinking of this Elijah story. Probably they were surprised by Jesus' rebuke. After all, their reaction to the Samaritans' rejection of Jesus made sense. There was precedent for it. Only days before they'd seen Jesus standing on a mountain with Moses and Elijah. Surely responding like Elijah had, was God's will.

But Jesus rebuked them.

Jesus refused to follow the expected script. He chose mercy. He chose compassion. Over and over again Jesus chose and chooses grace over punishment – forgiveness over retribution. This was a hard thing for his disciples to wrap their heads around. I think it's still often a hard thing for Jesus' disciples to wrap our heads around.

Starting at verse 57 we read of three different people who wanted to follow Jesus. I think what's happening here is that we're meant to turn our eyes off 'those people' who rejected Jesus and instead look more closely at ourselves – those of us who haven't rejected Jesus. Where James and John had this whole triumphalist attitude – sure their side was going to win, sure Jesus was going to become their new king and they, because they'd been with him from the beginning, were going to have positions of power and prestige in his new kingdom, Jesus was quick to remind them that following him wasn't going to be easy. Following him might mean rejection, suffering, loneliness.

The first person said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Sounds great, doesn't it? You'd think Jesus would be thrilled by this. But this is how Jesus responded: "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." In other words, "You say that now, but it's not going to be as great as you think. Following me may mean alienation and rejection. It may mean you have no place to call home."

Jesus said to the next person, "Follow me." That person said 'yes'. Great. And then he said, "But first, let me go and bury my father." Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? It sounds biblical. It's right there in the 10 commandments that we're to honour our mother and father. Surely burying one's father is to honour one's father. But Jesus had no time for it. He said to the man, "Let the dead bury their own dead."

Whew! That's pretty harsh. Where's our gentle Jesus meek and mild now? Where's the man so known for his compassion? Can you imagine being in this person's shoes? Jesus shows up and invites you to follow, but your dad has just died. Are any of us going to just walk away to follow Jesus?

The next encounter is similar. Jesus invites another person to follow him. That person also says 'yes.' In this case, the person wants to say goodbye to his parents before taking off. Again, sounds perfectly reasonable. It sounds like the right thing to do – to honour mother and father by at least saying goodbye. But again, Jesus' response seems uncharacteristically harsh. He says to

this person, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

What is going on here?!

We could write this all off as being specific to the situation at hand – Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. The end is coming. There’s no more time to delay. If anyone wants to follow him or go with him to Jerusalem, it’s now or never.

It would be really nice if these verses were just historically interesting – if we didn’t have to ask any questions about how they might apply to us. But the gospels aren’t about being historically interesting. Everything the writers chose to include is included because it’s somehow applicable to us – the gospel readers.

So what are we to do with these harsh, uncompromising words of Jesus’?

I think, when Jesus first spoke these words and when Luke later included them in his gospel, there was a sense of urgency about Jesus’ mission. There was this sense of immediacy about God’s coming kingdom. Even though, by the time Luke was writing, 30 or 40 years had passed since Jesus’s death and resurrection, there was still a sense of urgency. People expected that Jesus would return soon and that when he did, God’s kingdom, with Jesus on the throne next to the Father, would finally, fully arrive.

But now 2,000 years have passed. Sure, there are always people saying that *now* is the time. But I don’t think most of us really believe it. I think many of us *want now* to be the time, especially as we are inundated with all that’s wrong in our world – plagues and wars and famine, violence and hate, oppression, and injustice, but I don’t think most of us are living like we really believe *now* is the time of Jesus’ return. I mean, imagine you knew Jesus was coming back next week, or at the end of the year. What would you do? How might your priorities change? Would you keep working or would you quit your job? Would you stay mad at people who’ve wronged you or would you forgive them? What would you do with your money (if you have any money)? Would you spend it? Would you give it away? Would you bury it in a hole in the ground?

Being a follower of Jesus means proclaiming the Kingdom of God. It means telling people about it, embodying it, and inviting others to be part of it. It means that everything else is secondary to this mission. Everything. Our families, our jobs, our own lives. It doesn’t mean those things aren’t important. In fact, often the people among whom we’re called to proclaim the Kingdom of God are our families and our co-workers. The places in which we’re called to embody the Kingdom are those places in which we live and work. Being a follower of Jesus is by definition to live a life focused outward – on other people. But the way we focus our lives, how we live our lives, must first and foremost always be about Jesus and his Kingdom.

I don’t know about you, but when I hear these words they exhaust me. Have you ever been part of a big event – like a wedding or a funeral or a huge party? There’s so much work to do. Everything else in life gets pushed aside for a bit because all attention is required by this big event. And then it’s over and we can rest and get back to regular life. When I think about being a follower of Jesus, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, embodying it, ensuring that it is the most important thing in my life, it feels like I’m talking about a big event like a wedding or a funeral

or a huge party. When Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and invited people to follow him, it feels like he was asking them to be part of this huge thing that would require everything of them in a way that wasn't even a little bit sustainable.

I think that's the challenge of Jesus' words to the person who wanted to bury their father, or the person who wanted to say goodbye before leaving. There wasn't time for those things. There was an urgency about Jesus' mission. But what are we to do when the urgency has subsided? What are we to do when it seems that Jesus' return isn't imminent? How do we go about living life as followers of Jesus in a way that is sustainable, but that doesn't deny Jesus' requirement that following him be the priority?

I think we take a lesson from the people of Israel, exiled all through the Babylonian empire, living among strange people who were living their lives in strange ways. Israel's temple was no more. There was no place of worship in which to gather and hear the words of Scripture and pray the ancient prayers of their people. God seemed distant – like maybe he'd abandoned them, or forgotten them. It was to these people that Jeremiah wrote these words:

“This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ‘Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.’”

In other words, go about living your life. But do so in a way that honours God. Do so in a way that embodies God's kingdom wherever you are.

I think Jesus' words to those who wanted to follow him, but had other things to do first, still hold true. I think Jesus wasn't saying that things like funerals and grief and saying goodbye aren't important. I think what he was saying was that there's a right order to things for those who would be his followers. I think he was saying that our first priority must be proclaiming and embodying the Kingdom of God, and that everything else lives under that umbrella. I think he was saying that to be his follower – his disciple – means that every part of our lives must take its shape from Jesus. Every decision we make and every step we take must reflect Jesus' character – must embody the kingdom of God like Jesus embodied the kingdom of God. I think he was saying that we must be willing to let go of everything else so that we can hold securely onto Jesus. I think he is challenging us to name those things in our lives that are more important to us than Jesus – more important to us than God's kingdom – more important to us than daily living like Jesus, embodying God's kingdom.

As you go into whatever your week has for you, maybe ask God to reveal to you if there is anything you are attached to, that keeps you from following Jesus fully and freely. Or, to put it a different way: What is there in your life that keeps you from following Jesus completely? Maybe you can't answer that question yet, because first you need to reflect on this one: What does it look like for you to follow Jesus completely?