

FOLLOWING

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Central United Methodist Church
June 27, 2010*

(Luke 9:51-62) When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. {52} And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; {53} but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. {54} When 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?" {55} But he turned and rebuked them. {56} Then they went on to another village. {57} As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." {58} And 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." {59} To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." {60} But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." {61} Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." {62} Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

PEOPLE GET READY

I discovered this on the website of one of the nation's largest churches that promotes a feel-good prosperity gospel:

An author once said, "Our lives will always move in the direction of our most dominant mental images." In order to bring all the spiritual and earthly blessings God has promised into reality, we have to first get a new mental picture of ourselves.

Take a moment and "Picture this":

You wake up each morning and take authority over your mind, emotions and will; therefore you are excited about that day and expecting God's favor in every area of your life. You live in total confidence that you are exactly where you are supposed to be, doing exactly what God meant for you to do. You are living in perfect alignment with God's will for your life.

You are happy to be yourself; to be the original God created you to be and you don't compare your looks, talents, social status or finances to anyone else. You have God's stamp of approval and walk in your anointing daily. You can honestly say that the joy of the Lord is your strength!

Wisdom is beside you to guide you and direct you in all your ways; so everything you put your hands to prospers. The law of kindness is on your tongue and the words you speak are full of truth. Everyone that hears you experiences freedom – therefore, it is a joy for others to be in your presence.

You experience God's favor and unprecedented blessings which overflow onto those around you. You have no cares because you have given them to God. You delight in the Lord and He has given you the desires of your heart. You are led by the Holy Spirit and walk in peace with great expectation of what God has in store for you that day.¹

Whatever dominant mental image the Disciples had of themselves was destroyed on the day they walked into a Samaritan village with Jesus. This was not a feel good day for the disciples and it was about to get worse. As they had done so many times in the past, the disciples managed to say the wrong thing at exactly the wrong time. Still confused about Jesus' purpose, they suggest an aerial bombing on the inhospitable Samaritans. Imagine the disappointment and sting of Jesus' rebuke.

COUNT THE COST

Then imagine if you can the shock of the three individuals who are summarily deflated by Jesus response to their energetic wish to follow. ***“I will follow you wherever you go,”*** the first one says with the resolve

¹www.lakewood.cc. Accessed 6/22/2010.

of someone who has not really counted the cost. Jesus, seeing directly into the core of his motivation, says to him,

Look, I'm no military leader and there are not going to be any medals in the battle I'm about to wage. The glory and honor you seek can only be found where foxes (a veiled reference to Herod) and birds have nests. The comfort and glory you seek can only be found elsewhere.

To the second who uses his family as an excuse to delay commitment, Jesus responds that he should ***“Let the dead bury their own dead.”*** Finally, to the third less than enthusiastic follower Jesus reminds him that it takes focus and purpose to follow him. Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and fails to look where he is going is bound to end up with crooked rows and destroyed crops. The point is that most of us want to follow but only half way. We follow as long as it doesn't get in the way of our other concerns and obligations.

For Jesus two roads diverged, one led back to Galilee, the other to Jerusalem. Jesus made his choice. The road to Galilee was where most of his ministry took place. Galilee was a simple place with rural people. It was home and it was safe. It was the place where he prayed with, trained and taught his disciples. It was a simple life. It was a good life filled with laughter and satisfaction.

The other choice was Jerusalem. The name means ***“peace”*** but there would be no peace for Jesus in that place. Jerusalem was a seething cauldron of blood and death. Jerusalem was darkness but Jesus, as the Greek literally translates, ***“made his face into hard flint to go to Jerusalem.”*** Imagine yourself making that kind of choice. There were plenty of people in Galilee in need. There were bodies that needed to be healed, scripture to be taught, thousands of hungry to be feed, and little children to be blessed. A person could settle down in Galilee but Jesus chose Jerusalem.

In our culture, Galilee is the obvious choice. Instead of the challenge of Jerusalem, we've been told that Jesus is the solution to all our problems, a means of making our life more pleasant, and a way to fix whatever ails us, including our financial woes. The Christian faith is promoted on the basis of its benefits not on the challenge of discipleship and sacrifice. Need a little lift, psychologically speaking? Then Jesus can give you all you need.

Evangelical pastor and founder of sojourners magazine, Jim Wallis says that “*conversion*” to Christ, in our narcissistic culture, has been reduced merely to therapy in which we ask what Jesus will do for us rather than what we can do for Jesus:

The Gospel message has been molded to suit an increasingly narcissistic culture. Conversion is proclaimed as the road to self-realization. Whether through evangelical piety or liberal therapy, the role of religion is presented as a way to help us uncover our human potential—our potential for personal, social, and business success, that is. Modern conversion brings Jesus into our lives rather than bringing us into his. We are told Jesus is here to help us to do better than what we are already doing. Jesus doesn't change our lives, he improves them. Conversion is just for ourselves, not for the world. We ask how Jesus can fulfill our lives, not how we might serve his Kingdom.²

What do we do with today's gospel that seems to run contrary to society's expectations?

SAY “YES”

If most of us were asked why we go to church, we would reply that church helps center us spiritually, it calms our nerves in an anxious world filled with stress and tension. The music, prayers and fellowship

²Quoted in William H. Willimon, “*He Set His Face to Jerusalem*” (Pulpit Resource, July 1, 2007), 8.

with other believers helps us to settle down and be at peace. But Luke reminds us that Jesus was ultimately headed in another direction. There were quiet walks in Galilee and meditations delivered under the olive trees. But Jesus went to Jerusalem where he flipped over tables in the temple and prayed with great drops of blood and white knuckles in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus struggled. Maybe we are supposed to learn through all of this that saying “**yes**” to following Jesus is about struggle more than serenity and comfortableness. It’s doing the things that run contrary to culture and society’s expectations.

- Instead of revenge try turning the other cheek,
- Love your neighbor as yourself even when your neighbor doesn’t speak English or has a different faith practice,
- Feed the hungry even when they are ungrateful,
- Comfort the afflicted when it’s not comfortable to do so.

So what does it take to say “**yes,**” to follow in faith and to struggle with discipleship? Maybe some of you remember the story of Oscar Romero. He was a Bishop in El Salvador. The year was 1977 and the people were demanding free elections. There were Salvadorians who had no rights. They were oppressed by the government, especially poor sharecroppers. The military were burning farms and murdering anyone who spoke out against the government. In the midst of the violence and oppression, some priests understood the people’s needs. The rich landowners and the military considered these priests subversive.

Romero was not a subversive or even moderately radical priest. Rather, he was a quiet man who read books and studied. Imagine the surprise of fellow priests and laity when he was appointed archbishop of El Salvador. At first, Romero was moderate in his views but then he began to see the injustice that surrounded him and was destroying his country. A friend and fellow priest was brutally murdered and another was mercilessly tortured. All of this began to affect Romero.

The turning point finally came when Oscar Romero went to a village where the president elect had closed the church where his murdered friend had served. The militia had taken over the building. It was being used as a barracks. Romero told the commander that he was there to celebrate Holy Communion. The soldier's response was to turn towards the altar and open fire on the cross. His men then forced Romero to leave the church.

Romero got into his car and drove away but then he had the driver turn around. Once back at the church he emerged from his car, put on his alb, stole, and entered the church with determination. Two other priests joined him and many of the village people marched in behind the procession. Romero turned and announced to the villagers, ***"I have come to retake possession of the church and to strengthen those who the enemies have trampled down. Jesus is crucified in you."***

When Romero became Bishop, he was a moderate who shied away from trouble. Once he saw his people's needs their suffering, pain and hunger for liberty he began to change. When Romero became Bishop, he was a bookworm who ***knew about*** Jesus. Romero, who took back the church from the armed guards, ***knew personally the Christ who was crucified in the people themselves***. In the end, because of his solidarity with the people, he was assassinated.

When I read this story, I responded in the same way I'm sure you are responding now, ***"I'm no Jesus and I'm not Romero."*** No doubt, that is true. Fortunately, for the faith communities in El Salvador, Romero said ***"yes"*** to the challenge before him. He followed Christ's example and opposed the powers of the state and church. He abandoned tradition and did what seemed crazy to many.

When we choose to follow Jesus, it doesn't mean that we are going to be famous like Romero. Nor am I saying that choosing to follow Jesus necessarily means death. What I am saying is that following Jesus is not about self-fulfillment, prosperity, or even perfect happiness. It

sometimes means going against culture, family and the expectations of the many. I don't know what the three on the road to Jerusalem ultimately decided when Jesus invited them along for the trip to Jerusalem. What I do know is that there are people like Oscar Romero who decide to say “yes” and it makes all the difference in the world. What do you say when Jesus says follow me? Saying “yes” has consequences that change everything. Are you ready to live them out?

**Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, help me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn,
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light, take my hand,
Precious Lord, lead me home.**