

Reluctant Disciples

Have you ever wondered if you are a reluctant disciple? I know I have. Many years ago, back when I was a good Presbyterian, a first-year student at Princeton Seminary in New Jersey, I found myself standing before a gathering of approximately 200 elders representing 50 or so churches that constituted the Presbytery of Seattle. I was among several seminarians that were asked to give an update regarding our progress towards ordination and discerning our calls as Christian leaders.

Needless to say I was a bit nervous and a little intimidated. As I prayed, all I could hear the Holy Spirit whisper to me was, “Whatever you say tell them the truth.” So I did. It went something like this, “Every day I am in hot and humid New Jersey, I pray a short prayer, ‘After I graduate from seminary God send me anywhere—anywhere at all—as long it is in the beautiful Pacific Northwest.’” First there was a pregnant pause, then a round of roaring laughter arose from the assembly, followed by a loud, “Amen.”

In today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, Jesus meets several would-be disciples who were all doing their own version of “reluctant discipleship.” It begins with James and John, two of the original twelve disciples, the hot-headed sons of thunder, who really should have known better as they had spent the most time with Jesus.

True, they had every right to feel hurt and angry after being refused hospitality by a Samaritan village but Jesus’ way is not the way of violence. Centuries earlier the Assyrians had invaded the region and took most of the Jews into captivity. The Jews left behind in the region of Samaria intermarried with other ethnic groups and began to develop syncretistic religious practices.

Eventually the Jews in captivity returned to the homeland to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem but rebuffed the Samaritan community’s offer to help because the Samaritans were seen as inferior. In response the Samaritans created a rival center of worship at Mount Gerazim. And so, a great wall had been created that both groups were equally responsible for having constructed.

So back to James and John the reluctant disciples who are having great difficulty following Jesus because they couldn't give up their right to retaliate and even annihilate the so called Samaritan enemies, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" And Jesus sharply rebukes them for he has taught them a better way, "When rejected you are to shake the dust from your feet and move on."

If we are to be Jesus' true disciples, we need to know how to handle rejection and differences without resorting to violence. This issue couldn't be more alive in our country than this present moment. Rejection by those who are attached to "works of the flesh" to use the language of the Apostle Paul most surely will happen—subtly or blatantly—if we vigorously seek to follow Jesus and bring God's kingdom into this world. What does God's kingdom look like? It is known by the fruits of the Spirit which are: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Along the road to Jerusalem, Jesus met another type of reluctant disciple. He says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." I will call this type of reluctant disciple "the wherever man." I have a fond admiration for him as I recognize him in myself. Perhaps you do, too. This is the disciple who initially is eager to make the commitment to follow Jesus but begins to get cold feet when the cost of discipleship becomes too high. Jesus calls "wherever man" out by saying to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." His big "wherever" is met with Jesus' "nowhere." He was doing her own version of, "Send me wherever as long as it's the Pacific Northwest."

Jesus was curt in responding to him, "Wherever woman, are you really ready to rough it after you start following me? We're not staying in the Holiday Inn, you know!" I hope all of the folks preparing to be commissioned for the Skagit Valley Mission Team today are listening to this! Jesus, frequently calls us to uncomfortable discipleship.

Next we have a third type of reluctant disciple to consider: "the dutiful son." This can easily be translated as "the dutiful daughter" as well. His response to Jesus' call to follow him is "Lord, let me go and bury my father." His reluctance to follow Jesus is not only understandable, it's commendable. In the ancient Middle East, the phrase "to bury one's father" refers to the son or daughter's duty to remain home and care for one's parents until they have died and are laid to rest.

This is such a tricky type of reluctance because there is so much good mixed in with it. It requires very careful discernment. On one hand we need to respect and honor our responsibilities to care for our family members, especially in their hour of need. In our society right now there are too many examples of how individuals have placed their personal achievement and success ahead of caring for aging parents, vulnerable adults and children. However, on the other hand, if we aren't careful we can let all of our duties and responsibilities to take care of others get in the way of discerning God's will for our lives. We can easily descend into a place of resentment and burn-out.

It is so important to remember that when we follow Jesus, no matter how rough the road, He takes us further into His kingdom. God's kingdom is the place in our hearts where the fruits of the Spirit reign: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." If we are not able to consistently manifest these fruits in our discipleship then it is likely that God is asking us to re-examine our call or ask for more help from others, especially from the Body of Christ (which is us!)

Lastly we have one more type of reluctant disciple to emerge from today's gospel lesson. I will call him "the disciple who first needed to say good-bye." Like the "dutiful son" or "dutiful daughter" type of reluctance it not only is understandable but commendable: "I will follow you Lord but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Isn't that what most of us have been taught is the respectful thing to do as children—make sure our family, especially our parents and authority figures approve of our choices.

Although it is uncertain how old this would-be disciple is, I would like to encourage you to imagine that it is a young adult who feels a need to go to his or her parents and get permission to leave home before embarking on an exciting adventure. In ancient times that would have been even a greater likelihood as family needs nearly always came before the needs of an individual. Think of a time when you passionately wanted to follow a path or a call from God but were reluctant to do so because powerful people in your life wouldn't approve of it. Ultimately we have to do what is pleasing to God.

I think Jesus' response to the disciple who needed first needed to say good-bye is fascinating, "No one who puts a hand to a plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." A modern translation of this metaphor would be the danger of

turning around and looking back into the rear window of your car while driving on 405. You would very quickly lose sight of the direction the car should be heading, swerve off the road and crash. I believe Jesus is saying that even very good things like saying goodbye to family or getting their buy in can, if we are not careful, keep us from responding faithfully to God's call.

And so today, we remember and celebrate all of God's reluctant disciples:

Seasoned veterans and new recruits;

the procrastinators and excuse-makers;

the over-analyzers and the impulsive;

the over-achievers and the under-achievers;

the foolishly courageous and the cowardly avoidant.

God blesses us all and calls us to be his disciples. Send us anywhere and everywhere, dear Lord, as long as it is the beautiful Pacific Northwest! Amen.