

***“Call and Commitment”***

***“ . . . he turned and rebuked them.”*** I have to wonder: What must that have been like? What would it take to get Jesus riled enough to speak a harsh word? Luke does not tell us what the rebuke was — it could have been something as mild as *“Enough of that!”* to something more intense, like *“What in the world are you thinking? ‘... command fire to come down from heaven and consume them’? Who do you think you are that you could ‘command fire’?”*

It was that comment by James and John that warranted the rebuke. What was it for which Jesus rebuked the disciples? For wanting to use their power in a way that contravened the Gospel. If you think that followers of Jesus have learned from this episode not to think that they should take upon themselves the judgment of others, then you haven’t been paying attention for the past several decades. Preachers and politicians have made headlines, careers, and reputations from doing that very thing — praying for God to strike dead those with whom they disagree, seeking to oust any and all who might vary from their opinions, and seeking to label, label, label people, events, circumstances and yes, even cartoon characters as warped, dirty, disgusting, and evil.

The disciples in Luke were concerned (no, that’s too nice; they were hacked off!) about some Samaritan villagers who did not want to welcome Jesus. The villagers’ reason for this rejection? Luke tells us it was ***“... because [Jesus’] face was set toward Jerusalem.”*** We look at that and go *“Huh?”* But if we understand two things, this becomes much more clear. First, Samaritans rejected the whole sacrificial system at Jerusalem. To them, Mount Gerizim was as holy as Mount Zion, and there was no requirement in their cult for animal sacrifices, blood offerings, and the like. This was one of the issues that made the Samaritans so unsettling to Jews. Second, throughout His ministry, Jesus faced rejection once people realized what He was really up to. It happened in Nazareth, His hometown; in Galilee; and now here in Samaria — all of it is prelude to His final rejection in Jerusalem.

So when these Samaritan villagers realize that Jesus is passing through on His way to Jerusalem, they are not inclined to go along with His agenda. It would be somewhat like if one of my colleagues from Ashland Seminary were to come into our worship this morning and begin to shout “*Amen!*” and “*Hallelujah!*” in the middle of my sermon, or worse, yelled at you for not doing so. You would be offended by that, I am sure (and rightly so). Now, if I were to coax out of you an “*Amen*” or suggest that your reading of the “*Hallelujah*” in the liturgy could be a tad more sprightly, you’d likely accept that — from me, but not from some interloper who has no say in our affairs.

So the villagers are saying, “No,” to Jesus — as far as I read Luke, they are not, saying that Jesus is demonized, or blaspheming, or a bad person . . . they are simply not inclined to get with the program. And for this, this disciples want to wipe them out (?). The Church has had to struggle with this concern for most of its history — how far do we go to bring people into following Jesus?

We have pretty much decided that the best way to do this is to set up shop in this neat “downtown Streetsboro” location, put up a sign, and wait for the customers to roll in. But there have been times in the Church’s history when people wanted to go much, much further.

One emperor decided the way to do this was to march his enemies through a river to “baptize” them and then behead them as they came up out of the river on the other side. [Kind of puts a whole new slant on the idea of confrontational evangelism!] The Crusades were a form of this concern (although I realize that there were many more historical components involved in those sad episodes).

Mission societies sprang up all over Europe and North America in the late nineteenth century when some Christians determined that they had to convert the heathen nations. Unfortunately, many of them thought that this meant converting people to Western civilization first, so certain costuming was deemed necessary to receive the Gospel.

How far and how strongly to push remains a struggle, often a very

personal one. If you have a mate, or dear friend, or close relative who does not know Jesus, how do you bring them to Christ? It is a field often dotted with land mines.

On the other side of the equation, however, are some folks who Luke tells us come to Jesus as he and the disciples proceed to another village. Here come some would-be followers of Jesus: One says: ***“I will follow you wherever you go.”*** *“Glad to hear it,”* Jesus seems to say. *“But do you understand what that means? ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’ Are you ready to commit to that?”* Someone else stands before Jesus, wanting to follow . . . sort of. But this one does not understand the urgency of the Kingdom; he has other matters that for him have higher priority — ***“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”*** That’s seems a reasonable enough request; how long could that take? Well, at least a week, since that’s how long one was supposed to “sit *shiva*,” the period of mourning. Jesus’ answer to this man strikes us as unduly hard: ***“Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*** Some have tried to argue that Luke botched the Greek translation of Jesus’ Aramaic, and that what Jesus was saying therefore was something akin to, *“Leave that up to the funeral director.”* Most commentators, however, think that Jesus is saying something like, *“Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead.”* [I’m inclined to accept the second opinion.]

Another petitioner presents himself, ready to respond to Jesus’ call: ***“Follow me,”*** but also has a most reasonable request: ***“I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”*** Again, Jesus’ reaction is strong: ***“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”***

What are we to make of these accounts? I think Brian Stoffregen has said it well: *“Frankly, none of us are going to make the cut to follow Jesus. Our desires for soft pillows and comfortable beds, for fulfilling family and social obligations, will frequently have higher priorities than following Jesus — especially following Jesus all the way to the cross. We*

*might be willing to give up some evils in our lives to follow Jesus, but to give up all these good things — to put them as a lower priority than Jesus? That is radical discipleship . . . Perhaps the image of putting one's hand to the plow and not looking back (or driving forward in a car while looking out the back window) refers to looking back both at all the very good things in our lives (and in a congregation's life), like family and friends, comforts and satisfactions, 'successful' programs; but also all the sins in our lives, which have been forgiven by Christ. We can neither wallow in our past sins nor boast of our past successes if we are to be fit for the kingdom of God.*

*The opposite of looking back is to look ahead. I have found it quite difficult to have congregations 'look ahead.' They seem more content to look at just where they are (e.g., the bills that have arrived this month) or where they used to be (e.g., 'the good ol' days'), rather than where they might be — a vision of where God would have them go and then heading towards that goal."*

We must recognize that there is nothing half-way about Jesus' call to us. There cannot be half-way responses to that calling. They wind up as no response at all more often than not. But there is Good News in this . . .

***"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery,"*** Paul wrote to the Galatians. We have been freed from everything that would get in the way of our responding fully and complete to Christ's call.

Many stories have surfaced of what it was like for black folks after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation — most of the stories are a repetition of the theme *"They didn't know what to do."* Folks who had lived as slaves all their lives — 40, 50 years and more — had no sense of freedom beyond the word. So somebody said they were free: what did that mean? They could do whatever they wanted to do. What were they supposed to do? They were free to go anywhere they wanted. Where would they go? We Christians are often like that. We know that we are free! Now what?

Many do precisely what Paul is afraid the Galatians have done — they misconstrue freedom for license. The guy in the car next to you has his stereo blasting away with the super bass in full mode and the volume setting on “jet engine” and you are supposed to sit there and “share” the experience that is jarring your fillings loose because, *“It’s a free country, man!”* That is license, not freedom. **“... do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another,”** St. Paul advises. Becomes slaves? Hold on! I thought we were free!

Here is the paradox of the Gospel: In Christ we are called to freedom so that we may choose freely to become slaves to Christ and others. An operating model of this is found on a wall at LMM’s Men’s Homeless Shelter (it is the mission statement for LMM): *“In the Kingdom of God, nobodies are somebodies, and somebodies are called upon to become nobodies so that they may be somebodies in the Kingdom of God.”* Paul reminds the Galatians: **“For freedom Christ has set us free.”** Jesus does not condition His freedom-giving; He merely gives it to us. We really are free.

Jesus once claimed that He could get stones to sing His praises. Think on that a moment. What we do here this morning, Jesus says, is a role that could be fulfilled by rocks — is that an affirmation? I think not. Except, the rocks would not be rendering their praise freely. So when we praise, we render a totally free exercise of joy.

But we often want the security of our previous bondage. The Israelites left Egypt as free people — after 450 years of bondage. Time and again they grumbled about going back to Egypt — they missed stuff there: the fleshpots (which we have made into a term for brothel, but then simply meant a pot with meat in it), the leeks, the cucumbers (always the cucumbers; wow! Egyptian cucumbers must be really special). Many (maybe most?) of the slaves in 1863 stayed right where they had always been.

Freedom is tough! It requires of us that we take responsibility for what

we do. Many will say at that point: *“May I have a little less freedom, please?”* When we don’t really know what to do as free people, we easily fall back into rule-setting, moralizing, finger-pointing, and all kinds of other bizarre behaviors to get us back into the comfort-zone out of which we had been tossed. *“I don’t know what to do here! Give me a rule I can follow!”* Often the rules come disguised as “Ten Principles” or “Five Spiritual Laws” — go to any Christian book store and you will find shelves filled with such volumes, right next to the celebrity autobiographies that are somehow supposed provide you with moral guidance.

All of this is “looking back with your hand on the plow.” Listen now to Paul. You can use your freedom to bite and devour each other. You can do that! Is that what you want? You stand before the altar when there’s a voice that says, *“Do you take this woman?” “Do you take this man?”* You are free to say, *“No!”* You are free to ask *“Do I have to?”* But is that what you want?

Freedom is our calling. How will we use it? Paul suggests that we live by the Spirit. Is that what we want? What will that entail? Well, take a look at the “works of the flesh”: ***fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing,*** and things like these (you mean there could be more?). Is that what you want? The honest answer is: *“Some of them, yes, at least some of the time.”* That’s honest because that is, in fact, where we wind up.

Now, how about the fruit of the Spirit? ***Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*** Is that what you want? Again, the honest answer may be: *“I’m not sure. Have I ever experienced these?”* Oh, we’ve had tastes and hints, whiffs and nibbles — but have we really known joy . . . or peace . . . or full generosity . . . or what it means to be absolutely and steadfastly faithful? Sadly, most of us will have to say, *“No. Not really.”*

***“. . . those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its***

*passions and desires.*” Ooooookay, Pastor; you think there’s a clue in there, don’t you? You bet. Here’s how freedom comes: death and resurrection (now doesn’t that sound inviting?). We keep coming back to this theme in Jesus. It is nothing but death and resurrection.

Our calling in Christ is to die — die to what is past, die to our passions, die to what we have been and done, die to rules and laws, die to everything that is not of Christ — and to rise again. Rise to live by the Spirit, to be guided by the Spirit, to let the Spirit have control. Oh, I know, this is risky! That Spirit is like wind, you never know where it’s going or what it will wind up doing. So? The past is what you know. Look where it got you.

Try something you don’t know! Here is your calling in Christ: Let go of the past, let go of the connections, let go of your uptight grip on life and for once in your life *die* . . . and then rise and be free!

Amen.