

Like a Rock
Sermon on Luke 9:51-62 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, July 1, 2007

You have probably seen them before, either on a church sign or in an e-mail: those “ads” for God. The ones that say, “God is like Hallmark Cards: He cares enough to send the very best,” or “God is like the American Express Card: Don’t leave home without him,” or “God is like Coca-Cola: He’s the real thing.” This is the problem with trying to market Christianity: it calls attention to all the fun without any of the responsibility.

Will Willimon tells of serving a church that conducted a wildly successful evangelism campaign. Members of his church went throughout the neighborhood, inviting people to come to the Methodist church because it offered fun activities for children, a great youth program, a pastoral counseling program, beautiful music, and outstanding preaching. Then a woman named Gladys asked to what exactly were prospective members being invited. She pointed out that the church offered all these services—the children’s and youth programs, the music—to meet people’s needs, to entertain them, to fix what’s wrong with their life. “What’s wrong with that?” everyone wanted to know. “What’s wrong with the church meeting people’s needs?” “Seems like I remember,” said Gladys, “somewhere it says, ‘Take up your cross and follow me.’”¹

Discipleship doesn’t sell these days. Self-sacrifice isn’t sexy; it doesn’t have sizzle. “Take up your cross” isn’t something everyone wants as a sermon “take-home.” The question for the church, says Willimon, is, “How in the world do we call people to Jesus, appealing to their selfishness, their needs, and then end up with the discipleship spoken of in today’s gospel?”

The discipleship spoken of in today’s gospel is, in the words of Chevrolet trucks’ marketing campaign, “like a rock.” It is a tough, demanding, unequivocal, accept-no-excuses

¹ William H. Willimon, “Journeying with Jesus,” sermon preached in Duke Chapel on Sunday, June 28, 1998, found at <http://www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=59>.

discipleship. It is that way because Jesus had “set his face to go to Jerusalem” (Lk. 9:51). At one level, this phrase could mean something like “turn one’s face to,” “to head toward.” But it is a strong verb meaning something like “‘to fix one’s face against’ (some thing or someone in a hostile or threatening sense).”² The phrase echoes the language of Isaiah 50:7, where the servant of God sets his face like flint, “never to waver despite opposition to his task.”³ When Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, he showed that he was resolutely determined to face his destiny and any opposition related to it.

So when he arrived at the Samaritan village, only to face rejection and opposition, James and John thought they knew exactly what to do. Elijah, the Old Testament prophet and servant of God, had called down fire from heaven to consume the opponents of God⁴ to tremendous effect, so why not try it again? After all, when the going gets tough, the tough get going, right? Time to take matters into their own hands, to make the inhospitable Samaritans pay for their mistake, to teach them a lesson they wouldn’t soon forget. Fred Craddock suggests that we can sympathize with these brothers, the ones Jesus calls “the Sons of Thunder” (Mk. 3:17): They are angry that the Samaritans have refused to provide hospitality for Jesus, and in so doing, James and John are “simply being protective and do not know how to handle rejection.”⁵ They have remembered the words Elijah spoke to his enemies hundreds of years ago, but they have forgotten the words Jesus spoke to his disciples just days before. “Wherever [you go] and they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them” (Lk. 9:5). Jesus’ purpose is not revenge and retribution, and his mission is not to search and destroy unbelieving people, but to save and to reconcile all people.

² Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, Anchor Bible 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981) 828.

³ Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 148.

⁴ See 2 Kings 1:1-16.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 143.

The salvation and reconciliation of all humankind is the message of the kingdom of God that Jesus had come to announce, a coming reality in which he invited everyone to share. And who doesn't want to be a part of that kingdom, to have a place to belong, to be a part of something we believe in: peace with our enemies, justice for our neighbors, plenty for the needy, comfort for the lonely, healing for the sick, hope for the desperate, joy for the sorrowful?

So it isn't surprising that along that road to Jerusalem "someone said to [Jesus], 'I will follow you wherever you go'" (9:57). It is, in Joseph Fitzmyer's words, "a spontaneous, enthusiastic offer of unconditioned allegiance"⁶ made by a good-hearted, would-be follower of Jesus. It is the offer of the idealist and romantic, the offer of the dreamer and poet. To the offer Jesus must bring the reality. The reality of being my disciple, he says, is the reality of homelessness: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (9:58). Being a disciple of Jesus will involve not simply being away from home from time to time, but not having a home. Like the Son of Man, whose home is in heaven, disciples of Jesus must be prepared to have no earthly home. Discipleship demands a "sacrifice of security"⁷—"a willingness to live without even the basic security of a dwelling place."⁸

To another potential disciple Jesus said, "Follow me." But the man said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father" (9:59). This man, too, is willing to follow Jesus, but first he has a job to do, an obligation to fulfill, and not just any obligation. The man had to bury his father, to perform the sacred duty of a son in observance of the fifth commandment, to honor one's father and mother (Deut. 5:16). And so his request for a delay is both reasonable and legitimate. Yet Jesus responds harshly by saying, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and

⁶ Fitzmyer, 834.

⁷ Ibid., 385.

⁸ Ringe, 150.

proclaim the kingdom of God” (9:60). Jesus likely means, Let those who have not responded to me—the spiritually dead—go and bury the physically dead; the spiritually alive have more important work to do. Jesus clearly “demands that the priority of service to the kingdom be set over every other priority.”⁹ Jesus does not deny that the man has an important obligation, he simply says that those who would follow him have to make commitment to him their first priority. Even the call of family duty “is secondary to the call to follow [Jesus] and announce God’s kingdom.”¹⁰

Another brave soul offered to follow Jesus, but he asked first to be allowed to say goodbye to his family. Jesus wouldn’t give him permission, saying, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (9:62). Isn’t Jesus going way too far at this point? Isn’t Christianity the religion of family values? Why can’t a guy be allowed a few minutes to kiss his wife and kids before heading out to follow Jesus? Sheesh. Give me a break. Even tough old Elijah granted his protégé Elisha permission for just such a leave-taking before joining the seasoned prophet in his ministry.¹¹ But no, this request, too, is denied. If one looks back while plowing, the furrow would be crooked and the work in vain. Jesus asks for nothing less than 100 percent.

So how will we win followers to this Jesus? Who would follow a savior who seems more like a drill sergeant than a divine Son? The Church could teach the Army a thing or two about the difficulty of reaching recruitment goals. Make no mistake about it, the call to discipleship places on those who hear it certain unconditional demands. Discipleship demands that we count

⁹ R. Alan Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Notes*, New Interpreters IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 217.

¹⁰ Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK and Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 118.

¹¹ See 1 Kings 19:19-21.

the cost and consider carefully our answer¹², for it “is not something to be taken lightly or entered into casually.”¹³ Following Jesus is not an easy thing, a thinking that Jesus has some fine ideas and a program for political change I can sign on to. Discipleship requires that you and I make some hard choices, that we get our priorities in order, for Jesus wants nothing less than all of us: to love and serve God with all our hearts, all our minds, all our soul, and all our strength (Mt. 22:37). We are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him (Lk. 9:23) without looking back.

These are the radical and uncompromising demands of discipleship; they are like a rock. But for those who are ready to answer the call to discipleship, there is a power equal to the task, a grace sufficient for all our needs (2 Cor. 12:9). This is the love of God for whom nothing is impossible (Lk. 1:37) and from whom nothing can separate us (Rom. 8:38-39). For God is our Rock and our refuge, our shield and our strength, our stronghold and savior (Ps. 18:2).

¹² See Luke 14:25-33.

¹³ Ringe, 151.