**Luke 9:51-62** July 21, 2019

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*Luke 9:51As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. 52And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. 54When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them ?” 55But Jesus turned and rebuked them, 56and they went to another village.*

*57As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58Jesus replied, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” 59He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family.” 62Jesus replied, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”*

*This sermon follows an “Explore, Explain, Apply” outline.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Jesus Gets Unreasonable**

One month ago today, Herbert Jaster passed away. Few, if any of you, knew him. The man was every bit as peculiar in speech and manners as his fictional sounding name. Herbert Jaster taught at the Lutheran high school I attended, a high school which has since passed out of existence. At about age 60 he still lived with his mother. Actually his mother lived with him, but she was the sort of woman with a commanding presence whom you could never imagine requiring help from others, and so we thought of Professor Jaster as living with his mother. Rumors were that Professor Jaster had once been engaged, and that somehow that engagement was terminated in a soul-crushing manner. As I was saying, he was not a teacher. He was a professor. Always, even at school sporting events, he dressed in a suit. Serving also as the school’s librarian, his preference of classical music was never oppressively piped into the school library, yet it continuously wafted out of the librarian’s office whether he was there or not. Remarkably, the school’s faculty allowed him to select the students he wanted to teach in his history classes. Other professors taught the leftovers. (I sadly admit that I was a leftover.) As a professor he was demanding and precise and always gave lower marks than other professors. And his students, by the end of a year with Professor Jaster... most of his students adored him and all respected him.

Teachers of excellence often leave that mark. And here is one more thing: they sometimes leave students with as many questions as answers.

**Exploring Jesus’ Unreasonableness**

So Jesus’ Twelve students must have felt in Luke 9:62, the last verse of our reading.

In our reading there are four responses to Jesus. And we see Jesus respond to each. Let us stand with the disciples this morning and observe. I’ve heard people who say that they love airports, if for nothing else than to simply watch people. Let’s be watchers of people, of a person; observers of a teacher; true disciples of Jesus for a few minutes.

We start in the second half of our reading where Jesus encountered three people. These three encounters were probably not on the same afternoon, but a collection of events from different times in Jesus’ ministry.

**A.** First of all, a man says to Jesus, ***“I will follow you wherever you go!”*** How often does a visitor come into church on a Sunday morning and say to one of you or the pastor, “I want to be a member. How do I do it?” Well, actually it does sometimes happen. But if it does, the last thing you would ever—and I mean the *last* thing you would *ever* say to an eager prospect like that is what Jesus said to this eager beaver, ***“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.”*** More than a splash of cold water, Jesus dunked him in a glacier fed lake. “The pay is bad, no benefits, terrible hours, on call all the time. Want to follow me?” What are we to learn from that? “Are we, Jesus, to hate success? Are we supposed to avoid being liked? Are we supposed to chase people away from the church doors so that only those annoying enough to stick around until after we have made it clear we don’t want them around, that only those are welcome here?” How unreasonable!

While the evangelist Luke doesn’t tell us what this man did, it seems to point us in the direction that this man did not follow Jesus. No wonder!!!

**B.** Down the road, Jesus sees another man. This time Jesus tells him, ***“Follow me.”*** Well, this man can’t, you see. ***“Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”*** “I have a funeral at home. Let me take care of that.” Jesus’ disciples understood that. We understand that. In a day before any funeral service industry, burial of family members was an absolute priority. One ancient Jew expressed fear of his own death because, so he said, if he died then there would be no one to bury his father. Never mind no one to take care of his father, but no one to bury his father. (Stein, 301).

This roadside admirer of Jesus also fell afoul of our Teacher. ***“Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*** This response would have shaken Jesus’ disciples to the core. “No need to kick a man when he’s down!” They surely must have wondered if the stress of the crowds and the nay-sayers was getting to Jesus. No reason to lash out at a perfectly reasonable request like that!

**C.** A third voluntarily says that he is going to follow Jesus. Jesus didn’t ask him, he volunteered. He wants to go with this great teacher after taking care of one little thing: ***“First let me go back and say good-by to my family.”*** No time-consuming funeral arrangements and burial. “Just let me say good-by. They have a right to know I’m leaving don’t they?”

***“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”*** “Not fit for service?” That phrase has a special sting and stigma. “Not fit for service” in at least some contexts means that you aren’t even worth the bother of a speech, that words cannot explain the disgrace you bring upon the group.

Three men. Two volunteers and one called. All having credible, reasonable excuses for not following Jesus. And Jesus has unreasonable words for each of them.

**D.** Then there is the Samaritan village. We don’t have time to study Jewish-Samaritan relations. Let us simply note that it was genuine long-lived animosity. These Samaritans refused to give any assistance to Jesus on his journey. Jesus’ disciples, convinced of Jesus’ divine mission, felt the insult. “How dare they say ‘No’ to the King of Glory? Refusing a direct order from God? Jesus, you coldly rebuked those guys for a flimsy excuses. If that’s how you speak to people with bad excuses, what about these people! ***Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?”*** And do you know who Jesus tears into? It’s not the Samaritans, it’s the disciples. Jesus simply walks back down the path he had come up.

His disciples are left to think about all that. What does it all mean?

**Explaining Jesus’ Unreasonableness**

There is a cottage industry in trying to explain Jesus’ unreasonable words. Different commentators and preachers find ingenious ways to soften them, to make them sound reasonable. Some say that the man who spoke of his father’s funeral—that his father had not yet passed away and that this was just a delaying tactic. Maybe, but there is not a whisper of that in Luke. It is a guess by well-intentioned people who find Jesus’ words hard to stomach and don’t want people to be offended. People, even pastors, tend to do that when they come up against hard words from Jesus.

There is a saying out there that applies here: “Let God be God.” (As if he needed our permission, right?) It reminds me of something from a few years ago. In Luke chapter 14 it says, *“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother… he cannot be my disciple.”* I was asked to review part of a translation of the Bible into a local African language. In their translation of that verse they removed the word *“hate”* and they translated it, *“If anyone loves his father and mother more than me…”* I objected, “But that’s not what Jesus said. Jesus said *‘If anyone does not hate his father and mother…’*” The lead translator replied, “But that is offensive in our culture”—as if Americans find it acceptable to hate your mom and dad. I encouraged them to leave the word “hate” in there, because that is what Jesus said. That is what Jesus wanted to say. Sometimes Jesus doesn’t say things to agree with us, he says things to challenge us. “Let God be God.”

And so it is good for us to wrestle with those words, *“The Son of Man has no place to lay his head… Let the dead bury their dead… He who looks back is unfit…”* Maybe what we need to do, instead of trying to dumb down Jesus’ words so that they are palatable to us, is to take Jesus words at face value. Maybe we need to let those unreasonable words cause inner conflict instead of finding an easy ways to explain them away. Maybe God wants our minds to be captivated by these words, to pick them up like a water-smoothed stone you find on a lakeshore. That stone’s weight and feel are so captivating that you can’t put it down. You continually turn it over in your hand wanting to somehow internalize that feeling, to understand. Maybe God didn’t want to speak words that conform to our expectations, but maybe God wants us to conform to his expectations.

God wants us to be challenged with these words. He doesn’t tell us what any of these three men did. We kind of assume that they declined Jesus’ invitation, but God left it an open question. Their response isn’t the important part. The important part is what Jesus said, what he said to them—loudly enough for his disciples to hear, to be recorded for us today to hear. *“The Son of Man has no place to lay his head… Let the dead bury their dead… He who looks back is unfit…”* Jesus demands 1st place!

How unreasonable Jesus is! He questions the motives of would be followers. He rebukes his disciples. And he lets Samaritan rejecters off the hook… How unreasonable can Jesus get!?

**Applying Jesus’ Unreasonableness**

So what do Jesus’ unreasonable words mean to us?

If you like to hear people make excuses, try being a pastor some time. Unlike Jesus, pastors cannot look into a heart to know how much truth and how much dishonesty is in an excuse. It is very easy to toss excuses at pastors. There are excuses about funerals and children. There are excuses about family events and personal comfort zones. There are excuses about vacations and work. There are excuses about sickness, sporting events, and doctor’s visits. And at least sometimes there is enough truth in the excuses that pastors usually can’t call people on their insincerities.

Maybe that is why Jesus put these unreasonable words here. Maybe Jesus knew that his under-shepherds would be at a disadvantage, and so he thought, “Even if pastors have to give people the benefit of the doubt, people need to be reminded that there is no doubt before God. God sees into the heart. He knows the flabby lies, the dismissive excuses. *“Let the dead bury their dead… Who cares if there isn’t a place to lay your head… Stop looking back lest you be declared unfit for service.”* And just so no self-righteous pastor forgets the man in the mirror, Jesus rebuked his own disciples and their feelings of righteous indignation outside the Samaritan city gates.

Dear Jesus, how much we need you! We are surrounded by things that confuse us—and we are so willing to be confused! We live with a sinful nature that is always looking for an excuse. We love excuses when it comes to putting you in first place in our lives. Our desire to follow you is nearly always less than it should be, and always in danger of dying. Precious Lord, take our hands. Draw us. Drag us if need be. Teach us commitment based on devotion to you who have done so much for us. Forgive us. Empower us to follow. Help us realize that your unreasonable words are words we need to hear, day by day. Amen.

*Let us close by singing again the last verse of our hymn of the day, 465.*

***Haste, my soul, from grace to glory,  
Armed by faith and winged by prayer.***

***All but heav’n is transitory;  
God’s own hand shall guide you there.***

***Soon shall end this earthly story;  
Swift shall pass the pilgrim days,***

***Hope soon change to heav’nly glory,  
Faith to sight and prayer to praise.***