

Luke 9: 51 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."

February 14, 2016

Things We Can't Half-Do; Choices We Can't Undo

Luke 9:57-62

When I was in seminary, I had a wonderful Old Testament professor whose name was Arnold Black Rhodes, but everyone called him, A.B., put together and pronounced Abie. He wrote one of the most popular adult Sunday school texts of the 1970's and 80's, called *The Mighty Acts of God*. I'll always remember something he said one day in class, although I can't remember the context of the comment. He said, "*There comes a point when a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind.*"

At 33 degrees water is very cold – you don't want to swim in it! But it is still water. However, at 32 degrees, water is not only very cold, you *can't* swim in it because it has become ice. A difference in degree – literally – becomes a difference in kind.

Referring to the same concept, Tim Keller says that you can get in your car and drive north for a long way and still be in the United States. You can get closer and closer to Canada, but you are not *in* Canada. But then, with one more short roll of the tires, you have left the U.S. and entered another country. A difference in degree becomes a difference in kind.

It seems to me that Jesus is saying a very similar thing in these almost harsh-sounding responses to three different people who all say they want to follow him. They are coming very close to following him, but, haven't quite crossed the line.

The first guy walks up to Jesus and displays a level of enthusiasm every pastor wishes for in a prospective member: "I will follow you anywhere!"

"Pastor, give me a job. I'll do anything you need me to do!" Well, before they know what hit them they'll be teaching Sunday school, washing dishes on Wednesdays, singing in the choir, and shoveling snow off the sidewalks.

But Jesus doesn't react like that. "Foxes have holes, birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Wait, what?

To another Jesus says, "Follow me." *Jesus* says this; *he initiates* the relationship. And the man says yes. Just let me go bury my father. A reasonable request we would expect Jesus to meet with a bit of compassion. Instead, he says, "Let the dead bury their dead. As for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Really, Jesus? You can't even give him a day or so to attend the funeral? Even the biggest, most impersonal corporations give you a couple of bereavement days.

"I'll follow you," says another. "Just give me a minute to say good-bye to my family."

"Anyone who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God."

What is Jesus saying here in these three responses that seem so impatient, uncaring and demanding? Is he just in a bad mood? Feeling a bit stressed? After all, just before he encounters these three prospective disciples, Jesus has "set his face toward Jerusalem." He knows what is ahead: Arrest. Trial. Crucifixion.

Perhaps he's feeling just the slightest bit snappish with overly enthusiastic people he knows will disappear when the going gets tough, or with people who have something they think is more important than following him, right now, this minute.

Maybe he's saying there's a line and either you're on this side of it, or you're not. At some point a difference in degree becomes a difference in kind.

If you're not willing to give up everything; if you're not willing to go all in; if you're not willing to begin this walk with me to Jerusalem...*now* and *not look back*...if you're not with me all the way, well, you're not with me.

You can drive all the way from Key West, Florida to Lake Mooselookmeguntic, Maine, but until you drive those last few miles across the border, you're still in the United States. Getting closer to me is not the same as being *with* me.

We can be in the kingdom of this world, and we can walk right up to the edge of the kingdom of God, but, unless we take that last step of full commitment, we're still in the kingdom of this world.

Those were hard words in Jesus' day, and they've haven't gotten any easier in our day when do-overs and half-dones are commonplace.

In golf they call it a mulligan. You hit a tee shot and it hooks into the woods or slices into the lake. You say, "I'll take my mulligan," tee up another ball, and it's as if that first tee shot never happened.

According to the TV commercials, if you get in too much debt, you just declare bankruptcy and get a

do-over – at least that’s what the lawyers on TV say.

There are all kinds of do-overs these days, ways we can get out of whatever we had committed to in the past, without any real permanent damage being done. There are also a lot of half-dones these days; things to which we can give a salutary wave, a half-hearted effort, and get away with it.

Two half-dones that are really popular these days: short-term commitments and life-long agnostics. All volunteer organizations these days have a hard time getting people to commit to long-term responsibilities. Nobody wants to make a commitment that is longer than a weekend, or a month; maybe 3 months, tops. Why do you think the marriage rate is going down? Long-term commitments.

The second half-done is the life-long agnostic. Don’t get me wrong, I believe a period of searching and examining is an important part of faith formation. We need to go through a period of questioning what we were taught as kids, so that it becomes our own conviction. But, at some point, you’ve got to make a decision, because, I believe Jesus is saying here, if you don’t follow me to Jerusalem, you’ve made your decision. To NOT decide to follow him is to decide NOT to follow him.

But there are also some things that don’t allow do overs. I think that’s what Jesus means when he says we can’t put our hand to the plow and look back. You can’t unplug a field. Have you ever thought about that? If you’ve got a field and you’re trying to decide what to do with it, maybe build a house or put in a pool or plant a garden, and you decide to plant the garden, so you plow the field, you can’t go back and unplug it. Once the dirt is turned, you can’t go back and unturn it. You either keep moving forward with planting the garden, or you don’t, but, if you turn the dirt and don’t plant the garden, you’re like the one who says I’ll follow you anywhere as long as I can go home to my warm bed at night, or the one who says I’ll follow you *after* I do this or that or anything else.

Once you put your hand to the plow, you can’t move forward and look back at the same time. You’re either all in, or you’re not in, you’re still on the wrong side of the border.

The first man is like the new church member who is initially so enthusiastic. “This church is great!” they say. But, after a while, the newness wears off and suddenly this person who was initially so gung-ho is gung-gone. Jesus tells this first guy with all of the untested enthusiasm, “Wait a minute. Think this through, because you can’t half-do this discipleship thing. I’ve set my face toward Jerusalem. If you’re not with me, you’re still in Galilee.”

The second two men are like the old story of the Germanic Goths of northern Europe back when Christianity was first spreading across that region of the world. The Goths were a warring people. They loved to invade other peoples, attacking with their huge stone axes, killing and stealing and plundering. And then Christian missionaries came into the region and the Goths began to be baptized as Christians, but, when they entered the river to be baptized, they would keep out of the water the arm they used to wield their axes. When they continued to invade and kill and plunder, the missionaries said, “Wait a minute. You’re baptized, you belong to Christ; you can’t keep doing the same things you did before.” And the Goths answered, “Ah, but we kept our axe-wielding arms out of the water, so they were not baptized; they don’t belong to Christ.”

Lots of things in life can be half-done, but following Jesus isn’t one of them. Many of us are willing to follow Jesus around Galilee, pondering his parables and marveling at his miracles. But following him to Jerusalem is another matter altogether.

Many of us have all sorts of plans to be more faithful, be better disciples...in the future, but we’re just too busy right now with all sorts of things that just have to be taken care of first. *Then* we will catch up with him on the road to Jerusalem.

Many things can be undone, but following Jesus isn’t one of them. Like farmers preparing a field, we can’t look back and wonder if maybe we should have thought this through a little more. Once the ground has been plowed, you cannot unplug it.

With Jesus, we set our faces toward Jerusalem. *Like* Jesus, we don’t look back.

Discipleship is an all-in, don’t-look-back proposition.

His future awaits those who will go with him, who will take that step across the boundary from the kingdom of this world and its priorities to the kingdom of Christ and its promises.

Galilee is behind us; Jerusalem lies before us.

You can’t face both directions at once.