

Today's gospel is a difficult one. It's confrontational and it doesn't leave much, if any, wiggle room. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We're either looking toward the kingdom or we are not. We're either responding to the call of life or we're not. We're either open to the coming future or we're not.

Jesus is calling us into question and that's never easy, fun, or comfortable to get put through. He is calling into question the direction of our life, the values we claim to hold, and how we are living and embodying those values. Jesus is asking us to look at ourselves rather than the Samaritan on whom we'd like to call down fire from heaven.

Now, by Samaritan I mean those people in our little worlds that we think look, act, and believe differently from us; those who do not hold our particular religious or political beliefs; those who are not from these parts; those to whom we are opposed and in conflict with, for whatever reasons. And if you're not sure who your Samaritans are, then I would dare you, look at your social media feed and who posts the articles and comments that push your buttons, turn on the news channel you refuse to watch, picture the face of one you crush and defeat in the arguments that go on in your head.

Today's gospel won't let us turn away from the people and situations that are right in front of us or the future that is coming to us. Jesus recognizes and holds before us the tension in which we live our lives. On the one hand we say to Him, "I will follow you wherever you go." But then on the other hand we say to him, "But first let me go and ...." You probably know

what that's like. I know I do. Even the great Father and Doctor of the Church St. Augustine of Hippo (my patron) prayed, 'Give me chastity, and continence, but not yet.' Or paraphrased 'Lord, make me pure, but not yet!'

When have you experienced that tension in your own life? When has it felt like you were being pulled in two directions (or more) the way of Jesus and some other way or ways? In what ways have you said, "But first let me go and...?" I've done it.

It's easy and simple to follow Jesus, in principle. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. These are values Jesus holds. That's where Jesus is going. That's the direction in which He has set His face. That's the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good. Most of us would probably agree (I hope) with those values. It's the road we too have chosen to travel, in principle.

But it's so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life than in principle. I suspect we are all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until we meet the unloveable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch; or, the Samaritan in our life. Then it's a different story and that story usually begins with, "But first...."

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where He is going, who is included, or what He is offering. He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we are from, or what we have done or left undone. He doesn't care if you're a Republican or Democrat, citizen or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, black or white, good or bad, believer or nonbeliever – it all just don't seem to matter to Jesus. For Him there is no 'why', and there are no conditions, attached to His love, hospitality, forgiveness, or giving. He does not allow for a "but first" in His life or the lives of His followers. He meets them first offering peace and love.

The "but first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional. We think things like:

- Yeah, I will love the other person, but first let me go and see who the other is, whether they are deserving of love, whether I like them, whether they agree with and is agreeable to me.
- Yeah, I'll open my door and welcome the stranger, but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different they are from me, what they want, what I am *risking*.
- Yes, I will forgive another but first let me go and see if they had acknowledged their wrongdoing, is sorry for what they did, and has promised to change.
- Yes, I will give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me.

But first....

It's as if we are backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door. Let me say that again; *it's as if we are backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door*. It's as if we are walking backwards into our future, not wanting to see or deal with what is before us. It's as if we have put our hand to the plow and looked back. And we already know what Jesus thinks about that don't we.

I don't want to back my way through this life. I don't want to live, if you will pardon a bad pun, a *butt first* life. And I hope you don't either. I want us to turn and lead with our hearts; that deep heart that loves the unlovable, forgives the unforgivable, sees the unseen, welcomes the stranger, and gives without seeking a payback or even a thank you, showing dignity and respect to those with differing opinions.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. I wish I could resolve this in some neat and simple way, as much for myself as for you, but I can't. It's not about resolving the gospel. It's about resolving ourselves, resolving our hearts. That resolution is not a simple or one time decision. It's a way of being in this world, a way of relating to others; a direction for our lives. It's a choice we make every day. It's our road to Jerusalem.

That means looking at the ways in which we are backing through our lives. It means naming the people and situations to which we have turned our backs, and acknowledging that we do sometimes live a "but first" life.

I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without the “but first?” I think it would be risky and scary and look pretty crazy. But as I look at the world, listen to the news, and hear about the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So what if we took a better risk, faced a better fear, and lived a kinder craziness? And what if we were to let that start with you and me? Today! What if we were to let this start with us, today in our lives, in our particular situations, and with whoever or whatever is before us? Not tomorrow. Today! There is never a better time for change, then right now. If you feel you’re at rock bottom, then you have a firm foundation to start rebuilding. Hit a dead end, perfect – now you have to turn your life around.

What if we were to lead with our hearts and not “but first?”

I wish you peace.