

Lectionary 13 (C)  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
June 26, 2022  
Text: Luke 9:51-62

Pastor Aaron J. Couch  
First Immanuel Lutheran Church  
Portland, Oregon

Jesus' words in our gospel reading sound so harsh. To someone who wants to follow Jesus, but first must bury their father, Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their own dead." It sounds like: I'm not concerned about your family obligations. I don't care what everyone expects of you. I'm calling you to follow me now. Then, to someone who wants to say farewell to their family, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." It sounds like: I don't need half-hearted followers. I don't need folks who maybe think they might want to follow me, perhaps some day, if something else doesn't come up. I'm calling you to follow me with single-minded determination.

It would be a mistake, though, to understand Jesus as telling us to cut off all relationship with our families, to have no contact with them, to turn away from them and never look back. (That's how religious cults work, isolating the new convert from everyone who might have any contrary influence in their lives.) In the same sort of way, it would be a mistake to understand Jesus' statement about foxes having holes and birds having nests, but the Son of Man having nowhere to lay his head, as instructing us to vacate our homes and live on the street. But we also need to be careful not to so thoroughly accommodate and domesticate and compromise Jesus' teaching that it becomes only a strange word from long ago, and as a result loses the power to speak to us and to challenge us at all.

If we are to hear Jesus rightly, we need to begin by remembering that he is on his way to Jerusalem, and then realize what that means for him. The people he meets along the way don't know what is waiting for him in Jerusalem. Even the disciples seem to not know what is waiting in Jerusalem. But Jesus knows—and we know too. Rejection by the religious authorities and condemnation by the Roman governor wait for Jesus in Jerusalem. Death on the cross is what waits for Jesus in Jerusalem.

Jesus has spent his whole ministry making the kingdom of God visible in words and deeds. The kingdom of God is forgiveness of sin, it is healing, it is freedom from every bondage, it is restoration of relationship with God. Jesus has traveled the dusty roads up and down the whole country. He has visited the big cities, little towns and tiny villages. He has been calling people to follow, to find freedom and new life in him. He has been teaching in parables, patiently picturing the kingdom of God for everyone who would listen. He has told them how to live in the love of God, warning them against all of the things that would draw them into bondage. But the time for patience is gone now, because with every step Jesus comes closer to Jerusalem.

Jesus *simply* doesn't have time for folks to go home and take care of family responsibilities, because he is on his way to Jerusalem. He doesn't have time for people to say their good-byes and put their affairs in order, because for Jesus the end of the road is approaching quickly. He doesn't have time for folks to hem and haw and make up their minds. He doesn't have time for James and John and their violent fantasies of pouring down death

and judgment on people they don't like. Jesus doesn't have time for any of that, because he has set his face to go to Jerusalem, and with every step Jerusalem draws closer.

For us, the situation could hardly be more different. Jesus calls us to follow as well, but we've got all the time in the world—or at least we usually think we do. We probably don't feel a burning sense of urgency. There may be other things putting pressure on us—maybe there's a deadline at work, or dealing with family issues, or trying to make up our mind about a relationship. But we can always come back to church to hear Jesus say “follow me” again next week, or next year, or ten years from now—which is why we may need to hear the call of Jesus in a fresh way.

Jesus is not calling us to attend church services or belong to a religious institution. When Jesus calls us, it is to experience real freedom and new life in relationship with God, so that God's work of healing can come to us, and through us to our neighbors. When Jesus calls us, it is to forgive our sin and wipe away our guilt and remove our shame and release us from every form of bondage, everything that diminishes our lives, everything that makes us afraid and worried and anxious. Jesus has a new life for you, one that is bold and joyful and full of hope and peace. Do you really have the time to waste hanging onto a tiny little life that is only all about you? Do you really want to waste more of your life holding onto guilt or shame? Do you really have time to spend more of your life consumed with worry and anxiety, or anger or resentment or envy? Things like that can truly eat a person alive. Now, if you're OK with that, come back in another year or two, or ten. But if you're ready to really start living, to live the life God intends for you, a life grounded in a community focused on Jesus' way of love, a life that is blessing and joy, then come! This is the time to let go of all of those other things that claim you and put their mark on you and in the end make your life less than.

Or maybe your sense of urgency about following Jesus comes from considering the needs of neighbors. Our neighbors of color don't have all the time in the world to wait for justice and equity and an end to white supremacy. Our politically fractured nation doesn't have all the time in the world to wait for love of enemies and reconciliation and genuine neighborliness to become the rule for how we live together. Our planet doesn't have forever to wait for us to begin living simply and mindfully. The human family needs us to be people whose lives reflect the goodness and grace of God

Jesus is calling you to follow a way of living that begins and ends in trusting God. This way of living begins with trusting that God's mercy is for you. By God's merciful judgment your sin and guilt are wiped away. By God's action all the things that other people might condemn you for, or that you might condemn yourself for, have been completely dealt with. You are enough! You are treasured and precious in God's sight. And this way of living ends in trusting that through all the changes and uncertainties of life, you are held secure in God's love. Through all the losses of life, through all of the painful times, right up to and including death itself, you are embraced by God and will never be forgotten.

And in between beginning and ending with trust, this way of living is shaped at every turn by trust in God. Instead of relying on and seeking social measures of status and importance, we trust that the only truly meaningful judgment on our worth as human

beings has already been made by God who loves us and calls us beloved children. That means we are free to ignore all the ways people measure themselves and others—new car, cool friends, money, power, status. We are free to ignore all of that so we can focus instead on the only thing that matters: Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. Instead of being driven by desire or fear of missing out, we trust in the abundance that God provides—and then are set free to share with our many neighbors whose needs are truly urgent, and to work for the kind of justice that means everyone is able to have what they need to live. Instead of resorting to revenge or violence when we are wronged, we trust that Jesus' way of forgiveness and reconciliation is the only way that will lead to wholeness and blessing. So instead of striking back, instead of living by an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we learn to forgive, to love our enemies, to work for peace and to create bridges to bring people together. Instead of being worried and afraid about the future, we trust that God provides the only genuine security we can know. From this way of following, this way of living in trust, grows peace and joy and contentment, and generosity, with a hunger that everyone will know God's abundance.

For us, learning to follow this way is a life-time endeavor. Through the entirety of our lives, we are learning how to reshape our choices and decisions according to Jesus' values—compassion, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, humility, generosity, welcoming community. This life of faith amounts to nothing less than surrendering all we are in order to belong to God and be part of God's great work of love to bring healing and new life to this wounded world. That's the invitation we receive when we hear Jesus' call to follow—follow his way of compassion and forgiveness as it leads us to the reign of God. Amen.