

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Luke 9:51-62

Ever since I was a kid, something that I have always looked forward to doing in the summertime was going to an amusement park—usually it was Hershey Park. I loved to go on all of the rides, especially the rollercoasters and all of that kind of exhilarating fast moving, thrilling stuff.

I remember a time when I took the youth group to Six Flags Great Adventure; I found myself waiting in a long line to go on a ride called “Free Fall.”

This ride involves getting strapped into an open compartment with about 3 or 4 other people, and the compartment is lifted straight up—up high. It is then pushed out onto a ledge where you have a few brief seconds to look down to the ground and to say a quick prayer. Then your compartment is released, and you fall straight down.

Now you might ask why anyone in their right mind would go on a ride like this. As one of those nuts who did go on it (and I did it more than one time), I can tell you that the thrill of the ride was appealing and the thought of beating the challenge was appealing. But I can also tell you that there were those moments after I was strapped into the ride and lifted high into the air that I wondered what I was doing and I wished that I could get off the crazy ride, but I couldn't. There was no way off, so all I could do was hang on and go for the ride.

I guess you might be wondering what amusement rides have to do with discipleship. Well, I think an amusement ride such as the one I just described for you is a helpful illustration for talking about discipleship.

I think some people look at discipling for Jesus, like the amusement ride, and think **NO WAY! YOU CAN'T GET ME ON THAT THING!** The challenge looks too scary. There are too many unknowns, For example: Will it make me sick? Will it break? What is it like to fall that far? These take a look at discipling for Jesus like a scary amusement ride with lots of unknowns and they turn and walk away.

Others will look at it and say **“I'M GAME! I'M UP FOR THE THRILL!** It looks exciting to us. They love a good mystery, so the unknown does not scare them. They like that little funny feeling they get in their guts from the experience. They get high on the feeling of meeting the challenge. So, they walk right up to the line, and they get on. And they get on again and again and again.

Still others will look at the thing and think that it looks great. These people will get on and take the ride; but then for a variety of reasons, they will get off and walk away from it, too. Accepting the call to discipleship to follow Christ and allow him to work through you to touch the lives of others is not an easy thing to do.

In the story that we read from Luke today, Jesus sheds light on the requirements of discipleship. The message he sends is a little more involved this time. The stakes seem to be higher. If you remember back when Jesus first pulled together the group of men who were to be his disciples, he merely said to them, “Follow me.” To some he also said that he “will make them fishers of men.” But from what we are told about that initial calling, he really did not say a whole lot about the requirements. It seems from the variety of personalities and vocational choices of those he chose to be his disciples that just about anyone could be a disciple. He didn't say a whole lot about what they could expect in life if they chose to follow him.

Today's text sheds a brighter light on the meaning of discipleship.

I guess the first question that I would like to ask this morning is why do people choose to follow Christ? Why do people choose to be disciples for Christ? More importantly, I want to challenge you to ask yourself, “Why do I choose to be a disciple for Christ?” or “Why would I choose to be a disciple for Christ?” What is it that pulls us to want to do it? What is it that is so attractive about Christ that we want to do it?

Jesus did some very remarkable things. He was a miracle worker. He could heal the sick and send out demons from a person troubled with them. He could turn water into wine and multiply a few fish and a loaf of bread into more than enough to feed a few thousand people. That’s pretty exciting. What’s not to like about that? Who wouldn’t want to be a part of a miracle worker’s team?

Jesus accepted everyone, even those that society deemed as being the lowest and scummiest of society. Jesus loved everyone. His words and actions revealed his unconditional love even when people disappointed him. His love for humanity for all time was so deep that he gave himself as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins.

His love is still felt and seen in our lives today, exactly as he promised. Remember Jesus promised before ascending to be with his Heavenly Father, that he would be with us always, not just to love us, but also to help us. Those of us who know Jesus find it hard to imagine that anyone would reject his love and his help to live faithful to God’s will every day and through every situation.

But we know, people do choose not to follow Jesus. And there are those who choose to do so for a while but then change their minds; and still others appear to be walking on the line. However, for these, the truth of the matter is that no one can walk the line on this one and Jesus is making that real clear in this text. You either choose to follow Jesus or you don’t. And that very challenge or choice is the reason some people choose not to follow Jesus; they know that it takes a real commitment. In fact, it takes a lifetime commitment.

With this commitment comes a lot of unknowns. Jesus tells that to the first person in today’s story who comes to him and says that he wants to follow Jesus. Jesus is right up front with him and says, “You know, I don’t ever know where I am going to sleep each night. I don’t have the securities of home. It’s not easy because I don’t know what each day will bring; it may be good, or it may be bad.”

The unknowns of following Jesus can be a real hold up for some people. We like security. We like knowing how things are going to turn out. We like knowing all of the pros and cons of what we are getting into, but when we follow Jesus we don’t know all of that. When we follow Jesus, we give up the securities of this world and we live by faith. We trust that God is there for us, caring for us, helping us through the challenging times of following Christ.

The commitment required to follow Jesus as his disciple also means loyalty to him above all other persons or things. Jesus requires this of the second person that he invites to follow him. The man feels the emotional and societal responsibility of needing to care for his family; especially that of caring for the burial of his father. Now we don’t know from reading this text if the man’s father had just recently died or if the father was healthy now, and the man felt he needed to be with his family until the day his father did die. That’s really not important for us to know.

What we should be hearing in Jesus’ response to this man is not that he is disrespectful of the man’s responsibilities, but that Jesus is asking us “If not today, then when? If you do not make this commitment to follow me now when you feel the calling then when will you do it? What could be more important in life that you would choose it instead of me?”

Jesus asks us the very same questions today. He's asking us if he is the most important person or thing in our lives? He's asking us if we are choosing to follow him or the ways of the world. And he's probably wondering why some of us are putting it off and why we would choose to live in a world that offers only present-day immediate satisfaction instead of the present and eternal Kingdom which God promises to those who receive and follow Jesus? Jesus is not asking us to forget about our family and our responsibilities. He's asking us to put him first.

We all do that you know. We all put things off. It's just too easy to do things that way. Think about it, how many times have you said to yourself, I really should send so-and-so a card; or I really should visit so-and-so, but we put it off to do something else and then we never get around to doing what we thought about doing. Sure, we feel guilty for a while, but we soon write it off or we beg forgiveness, and we move on to the next thing in life.

I think something that goes hand in hand with this idea of putting off following Jesus is the reason that some don't always think of discipleship as an everyday, everybody sort of responsibility. Instead, people may tend to think of discipleship as something only a qualified person does when in fact all who receive Jesus into their hearts are expected to live a life of discipleship. There are those who think that working for Jesus is a "when the time and conditions are right" sort of thing, but, in fact, it is an everyday responsibility.

When you and I choose to follow Jesus, we also choose to allow him to live through us. We begin a life of sharing his love with others. We begin living a way that helps others to know him. We will all be challenged in different ways of doing that. Not all of us will be preachers or teachers or church board chairs or choir directors or the like. Some of us will be visitors and listeners, casserole takers, and card senders.

Whatever it is that we are doing in life and wherever we are, the conditions are always right to be a disciple for Christ. God has given us all that we need to be able to do it. Jesus has every confidence in us that we can do it. How is it then that we can turn to those who need us, filled with Jesus' spirit, whether with our words or through our actions, and say the time is not right or I'm not good enough to do that? How can we say to anyone that they've got it all wrong? When we put off discipleship for these reasons, aren't we really saying to the lost and to those in need, that we are more important, and our needs and comforts are more important than they are? A commitment to following Jesus in discipleship means not putting it off. It means putting Him first in our lives.

Jesus also teaches us in this text that the commitment to discipleship also requires that we look to the future instead of holding on to the past. When the third man tells Jesus that he wants to follow him but first he wants to say goodbye to his friends, Jesus uses this little analogy about a plowman needing to look forward when he plows his field. If the man kept looking backwards, he would have a really messed up field. If he looks ahead, he has straight rows for his crops.

Jesus is again up front with us here in his challenge to us. He tells us that we cannot live in the past and be his disciple. He reminds us that we need to give up all the things that we have known as security. The past helps us to know what we are comfortable with in life. From the past, we know what we've been successful at and where we have failed. That gives us a feeling of security in the choices we make about our future.

The past also can hold some very painful moments for us and that can stir up all kinds of feelings that become a part of who we are. We can be very angry about something we experienced in life, and that anger may be really tough to relinquish. It's easier to hold grudges than to give up our anger when we feel we've been wronged.

Some things happen that scare us deeply. We learn lessons from those scares that make us fearful about possibly getting caught in similar situations or that make us fearful of trying something new. Some of us have been hurt so deeply that the thought of ever going through something like the hurtful experience again keeps us from taking risks, even if it means possibly experiencing something better.

Jesus tells us that we need to let go of the past and let go of all of these things that hold us back from walking with him into the future. Yes, we can learn from the past and from time to time, we may need to look at what we learned from the past, but we cannot carry it with us into the future. It may only weigh us down and keep us from doing his will.

Jesus tells us in these few verses that discipleship requires us to give up our security and walk on into the unknown. It requires us that we don't put him off until a later time, but we walk on with him now. And finally discipleship requires that we let go of the past and we walk on to live in the unknown future with him.

Jesus did these things. We can see that everywhere in the scriptures. In the few verses before these encounters with these three men, we read a witness to these things. Jesus went into the unknown and gave up his security. He went into the unwelcoming world of the Samaritans.

He headed for Jerusalem where he knew things were not going to be pleasant for him. His focus on God kept him moving toward doing God's will instead of putting it off.

He didn't get discouraged and weighed down by people's refusal of him; instead, he kept moving ahead towards accomplishing God's goal—not only by getting to Jerusalem but also by sharing the word with those along the way. This is a wonderful example of true discipleship.

God gives us the choice of whether we want to follow Jesus' example. Everyone makes the choice—there is no middle road. Discipleship to Jesus Christ is a lifelong commitment, admittedly with lots of unknowns, yet at the same time, we receive the promise of being welcome into God's glorious kingdom. Amen.