

“Be Careful What You Ask For”

Luke 9:51-62

June 26, 2016

6th Sunday After Pentecost

In the movie *Bruce Almighty*, Jim Carey plays a television newsman named Bruce whose life is going poorly. He is not particularly religious but, in desperation, cries out to God and complains that he thinks God isn't doing a very good job. Furthermore, he thinks that he could do a better job of being God than God is doing. In a surprise move (to provide the plot for the movie, I guess) God (played by Morgan Freeman) appears to Bruce and offers him the chance to be God for the weekend. At first, Bruce finds this to be great fun. He can use divine power to get whatever he wants and to get revenge on those who have given him a bad time.

But when Bruce finds out that being God means running the universe and answering countless prayers, it is no longer so much fun. When Bruce tries to answer the thousands of prayers that bombard him by the minute by letting everyone have what they are praying for, chaos ensues. (Evidently, for example, letting everyone have the winning lottery ticket bankrupts the system and causes fights to break out. Who knew?) Bruce ends up eagerly giving the divine power back to God. It just goes to show the old saying you better be careful what you ask for, especially in dealing with God.

We could take the same warning from our text today. Jesus is traveling through Samaria and enters into a village. The people there do not receive Him and show Him hospitality. James and John immediately want to exercise divine judgment. “Lord,” they say, “do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

In our frustration over the present evil age, I think many of us would echo the sentiments of James and John. We'd like to call down God's wrath and judgment against horrible sinners. Some already have made a similar pronouncement. I heard a few Christian preachers claim that the victims in the Orlando shooting got what was coming to them because of their sinful lifestyles. Before that, Pat Robertson and others claimed that God sent Hurricane Katrina specifically as punishment for New Orleans' sin. Before that people claimed that AIDS was God's punishment against sexually promiscuous people, especially gay people.

Maybe you have sympathized with such pronouncements, believed them, or wished something to that effect: that God would strike down the really sinful people in our society. But be careful what you ask for. If God is going to send fire (or any other punishment) from heaven to destroy sinners, we are in trouble, too. Such flames will burn us, as well, for we are all sinners. If any of us thinks we are better than other sinners, we should remember Jesus' remarks when people brought him news that some Galileans had died at the hands of Pontius Pilate and insinuated that they were being punished for their sins. Jesus said, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:2-5)

Our desire to compare sin, evaluate sin, and decide who should get punished for sin is wrong. Jesus rebuked – criticized – His disciples for doing that and he would do the same to each for doing that. All of us are sinners in need of repentance. To think that some people are less sinful than others and therefore better is also foolish. It's like having a contest to jump motorcycles across the Grand Canyon. Does it really make a difference that you jumped 20 feet across the canyon while others only jumped 10 feet when all of you plummet to your deaths? Even if you could count all your sins and determine they were less than someone else, you are both going to die and go to hell for them. I saw a post online after the Orlando shootings that addressed the issue of feeling superior to other sinners and wanting to be the judge, jury, and executioner of the really bad sinners. It said, “Why do you feel superior to the Orlando victims when you simply offend God in a different way?”

So maybe we don't want the right and ability to call down fire from heaven to punish sinners because it doesn't turn out like we want it to. Maybe we should just stick to wanting to be disciples of Jesus. But even with that, you better be careful what you ask for. Too often, we want to follow Jesus but only on our terms, not His. Are we willing to actually follow Jesus (not just say we want to) on His terms and according to His priorities? Our text gives us insight into the difference between wanting to follow Jesus and actually *following* Jesus.

Someone said to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” This is the kind of bold promise we all make, beginning on Confirmation Day: “Jesus, I will follow you no matter what.” Jesus' answer might seem puzzling. He says, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” We are usually willing to follow Jesus as long as it doesn't inconvenience us and as long as we have enough “stuff”. Jesus is asking whether we are willing to follow Him to the point that we have no stuff or we have to change our lifestyles and priorities to follow Jesus thus reducing our stuff. Jesus says, “You cannot serve God and money.” (Matthew 6:24)

Sometimes, we want to follow Jesus *after* we have first taken care of some other priorities. Our text says, “To another [Jesus] said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” Either this man's

father was dead and the man was going home for the funeral or, more likely, the man wants to stay home until his father dies so that he can bury him and *then* can follow Jesus. Jesus says to the man, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." In other words, let those who are spiritually dead bury those who are physically dead. Your priority should be to proclaim the kingdom of God. In the same way, can we give up any and every priority for the sake of keeping the kingdom of God as the top priority?

Another man wants to take care of some other business before following Jesus. He says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." He has family commitments that threaten to take precedence over following Jesus. Jesus says to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." In other words, just as you can't operate a hand held plow while looking back without going the wrong way and creating crooked furrows, so also you can't follow Jesus while looking back (even toward your family and friends) without going the wrong way and missing the kingdom of God. Followers of Jesus are always looking forward, not backward. Are we able to leave behind every commitment, even to family and friends, to follow Jesus?

Our failures are obvious. Our views of God's judgment are flawed and self-serving. Our commitment to discipleship is often weak and sometimes non-existent. By ourselves and through our own efforts we are doomed. Thanks be to God that we are *not* alone and that our discipleship does not depend on our efforts. We have Jesus who does what is right in order to make us right.

First, when the disciples wanted to deal with people on the basis of judgment, Jesus rebuked them because He always – *always* – deals with people on the basis of mercy. This used to irritate the Pharisees because Jesus used to hang around a lot with the prostitutes, tax collectors, and other really bad sinners. Let's be very clear about something: Jesus never accepted or condoned sin. But He always reached out to sinners with love and mercy, rather than judgment and punishment.

He still does today. When we see horrible sinners commit horrible sins, rather than being irritated like the Pharisees and calling for God's judgment against such people, rejoice that God shows mercy to them and pray that this mercy leads to repentance and saving faith. More importantly, rejoice that God shows mercy to you and me. Instead of giving us the judgment and punishment that we deserve, He always shows mercy, always forgives, and always restores us.

Why? It's not because we are so faithful. It's because Jesus Christ was perfectly faithful for us. While the disciples were busy wanting to call down fire upon sinners and others were trying to follow God on their own terms, Jesus had "set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus was focused. You could say that He had a one track mind. And what was the object of His undivided attention? Going to Jerusalem to follow the Father's plan to obtain salvation for you, me, and all people.

Jesus followed the way to the cross, even though it cost Him everything He had, including His life. It was His one and only priority in coming to earth. He would allow no other priority, duty, or responsibility to dissuade Him from that task. He pressed onward, leaving family, friends, and other worldly things behind. He loved you and me that much.

Jesus' death on the cross is the ultimate and all-encompassing sacrifice for all sin and for all sinners. Jesus' death saves all of us from God's wrath over sin and God's judgment against sin, both of which Jesus experienced in our place. All of your sins, those which are evident to others, as well as the multitude of sins known only by you, are forgiven and wiped off your record before God.

Jesus' resurrection from the tomb to life again gives us the guarantee of life after death as well. Because Jesus lives, we shall live, too, even though we die. And, once we have been raised from death to life as God always intended for it to be, we will never die again. This is where Jesus is calling us to follow Him to – not a religious institution, not to a moral way of life – but to eternal joy, eternal peace, eternal life with Him in heaven.

Follow Him in His way and according to His terms. Do not let material possessions or activities, earthly priorities, or even family and friends get in the way. As valuable as all of those things are (and they are), Jesus is leading you to something higher, of more value, and eternal.

Follow Jesus closely. The farther away you get from Jesus, the easier it is for earthly possessions, priorities, and people to distract you. In His Word, as you read it, study it, and hear it preached, you will find guidance for the way you are to go and forgiveness for the times you've strayed from that way.

In His Sacrament of Holy Baptism, you will be assured of your identity as a son or daughter of God, fit to follow the way that leads to eternal life. In His Sacrament of Holy Communion, you will be fed with and strengthened by His body and blood so that you may faithfully follow Him on the way that leads to eternal life.

So, while "be careful of what you ask for" may be good advice, rejoice in what you didn't ask for and didn't deserve – freedom from judgment and the way to heaven. God has given you that through Jesus. Follow Him and receive it all. Stay close to Jesus in His Word and by His Sacraments and He will prepare you, lead you, keep you, and enable you to follow Him – through the poverty and problems, past earthly commitments, and by human relationships – to everlasting life in heaven.

Amen.