

“The Best Time”

Luke 9:57-62

June 30, 2019

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

“Have it your way” is an old and well-known slogan from a popular hamburger place called Burger King. The restaurant has used this slogan rather successfully to sell more burgers based on the promise that customers could have any of their products “your way.” Want extra mayo on your Whopper? No problem. You’ll get a Whopper with extra mayo. Don’t want any lettuce on your fish sandwich? No problem. You’ll get a fish sandwich without any lettuce. This advertising slogan has been successful, I believe, because it plays upon a very strong characteristic of our sinful selves. We are self-centered and we want things the way we want them and when we want them.

It wasn’t always this way. People my age and older remember a time when you couldn’t have things “your way.” In restaurants, the menu was fixed. Many menus said, “No Substitutions” (and, if you insisted on substituting something for a menu item, you had to pay extra). To want, expect, or demand things your way would not have happened. While there is nothing sinful or inherently evil about buying products that fit your specific needs or desires, the attitude of expecting everything to be “your way”, can be problematic. It seems to have infiltrated every area of our life. People have come to expect that the phrase, “have it your way,” should apply to every situation, including our Christian faith and how we follow Jesus. Does it? Can you have Christianity your own way? Can you follow Jesus on your own terms?

Many people seem to think so and believe that they have Jesus’ blessing upon it. We profess a desire or a commitment to follow Jesus, but things get in the way – other activities, other people, and possessions. Following Jesus either becomes too inconvenient or in conflict with other things that are more important to us.

Consider a newly minted confirmand. In the confirmation service, the confirmands are asked such questions: *Do you intend to hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully? Do you intend to live according to the Word of God and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?* To these questions, all confirmands answer with a resounding, “I do, by the grace of God.”

What then happens, beginning as soon as the week following confirmation? Things start to come up. The confirmation vow seems to be amended to read, “I intend to do these things by the grace of God when the right time comes.” When is that right time?

The teenaged confirmand will insist that now isn’t the right time but, after he has had fun during his high school years, then it will be time to take his faith seriously.

As a college student, he may think that, during his time in college, he needs exercise his independence and “sow his wild oats.” He’ll get serious about God when life settles down.

After college, he may get married and this young couple, just starting out in their careers and having children, may feel that now is not the right time to be involved in church, but vow to start attending church when there's more time.

As the children get busier and busier with school and other activities, the parents feel that now is not the right time to add something more to their schedules but, promise to get involved in worship when their busy schedule clears up.

Things get more and more hectic. The couple thinks about getting back to church when they're finally retired and have more time. THAT will be the right time.

Soon, one spouse is mourning the death of the other spouse and thinks that now might be the right time to focus on God. Finally, when the man dies, then it's all too late to follow Jesus. The right time never came.

I believe a lot of people would find no problem in that sad story. After all, to many people, the Christian faith means only some sort of vague belief in the existence of God and His love and that following Him is not a priority, but an occasional activity. If things develop as they did in the scenario just mentioned, Jesus will just have to understand and overlook or accept such things because it just can't be helped. We lead such busy lives and have many commitments, obligations, and necessities in our schedules. Besides, God loves me no matter what I do. He would never send anyone to hell who said they love Him, were confirmed, and followed, intended to follow, or thought about following Him, right?

Now, some people may roll their eyes and dismiss what has been said about discipleship as a rant of a frustrated pastor inspired by poor worship attendance or financial difficulties in the congregation. The pastor needs to relax and realize that we live in such a busy society that such strict interpretations of discipleship are a bit over-the-top. All that is really needed for 21st century discipleship is to believe in God and come to church when you can fit it into your schedule. However, our Gospel lesson for today tells a very different story about discipleship and Jesus' reaction to those who wish to have it their way.

In our lesson, Jesus is reacting to various people and their views about discipleship. The claims made by these people are similar to claims made by people today. The reactions of Jesus may surprise us.

As Jesus and His disciples are traveling on the road, someone comes up to him and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." This sounds surprisingly like some of the vows made on confirmation day – total and complete commitment. It sounds good, but Jesus is not impressed. Instead, He says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

It's as if Jesus is saying, "Will you really follow wherever I go or only in the good times? I have nothing, not even a place to lay my head. Are you willing to give up everything, deny your own desires, take up your cross, and follow me?" Jesus knew about potential disciples back then and what we see happen today. We follow Jesus as long as we can. We are willing to follow Jesus as long as it doesn't get to be too difficult and we can still lead a good and comfortable life. However, when there is difficulty, suffering, or danger, many people will give up their faith in Jesus before it cost them too much.

To Jesus' invitation to follow Him, another one agreed to do so, but then said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." This seems, no doubt, to be a very reasonable request. But it also shows how this man wants discipleship on his terms. Like in our opening illustration, where the young man said he wanted to follow Jesus, but always had something else to do first, the man in the Gospel lesson is willing to follow Jesus, but first he has to do something else.

How does Jesus react to this man's stipulation before following Him? Jesus says, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." While this may seem to be a harsh answer, it isn't necessarily. While it could mean that the father had died and the son wanted to go to the funeral. However, it could also mean that this man's father was old, sick, or dying and the man was offering to follow Jesus as soon as his father died and was buried. That could be days, weeks or even months.

A third man replies to Jesus' invitation and says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Again, a person expresses a willingness to follow Jesus but on his own terms and according to his timetable. The man wants to say goodbye or, perhaps, it could mean he wanted to ask for permission to leave. He wants to follow Jesus into the future while, at the same time, looking to and being tempted by the past.

How does Jesus reply to this? He says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Farm practices of the day would emphasize that, in plowing, you have to look straight ahead at all times. If you're trying to plow forward, but, at the same time, our looking back to see where you've been, you're going to go off in the wrong direction and plow poorly. You would not be a fit farmer if you plow that way. Jesus is saying that you would not be a fit disciple if you follow Him that way.

Jesus does not allow us the option of discipleship which lets you "have it your way." To follow Jesus whenever and wherever He goes but then back off when the "when" in whenever becomes inconvenient and the "where" where in wherever is difficult is not acceptable to Jesus.

To agree to follow Jesus but with any other priorities than the kingdom of God, even those of family and friends, are not acceptable to Jesus. If you are clinging to anything other than Jesus – possessions, family relationships, earthly obligations – and are drawn back to them, Jesus says you are not fit for the kingdom of God. Jesus is very clear on what discipleship means. He said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:33) Discipleship involves denying self, not indulging it. Discipleship means accepting suffering, not running from it.

Following Jesus Christ consists, not of pious platitudes and lofty promises, but of true and substantive action. It is more than "going to church" but it does start here. We come to church as an act of following Jesus. He has promised to be in His Word on the lectern. He has promised to be in the preaching of His Word in the pulpit. He has promised to be in the bread and the wine on the altar. When Jesus says, "come, follow me," we follow him here to receive His forgiveness in Divine Service; to be instructed

and strengthened in the faith in Sunday School and in Bible Class; and to be encouraged and supported by one another in the sanctuary and in the Fellowship Hall.

We follow Jesus into the world to proclaim the kingdom of God. We do that by witnessing to the love, forgiveness, and hope which we have in Jesus Christ by virtue of His sacrificial death on the cross as payment for our sins and His glorious resurrection from the dead as guarantee for our eternal life which begins now and continues in heaven after we die. We speak His Word. We share all of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us. We become tangible embodiments of Jesus' love as we love through concrete actions all people, good or bad; believers or nonbelievers; deserving or non-deserving.

Discipleship is not a matter of what you do or don't do. It's a matter of who or what you are holding on to. The only way to follow Jesus Christ is to let go of everything else. Following Jesus Christ is something that cannot not be postponed, fit into your schedule, or ignored. There will be only two groups of people standing before Jesus' thrown on Judgment Day – followers of Jesus Christ and those who didn't. There will be no group who intended to follow Jesus, would have followed Jesus if only things have been different, had more time, and so on.

I know what you're thinking. There is a lot of people who need to hear this sermon who are not here today. Each of us may have someone specific in mind. That may be true, but these are words that all of us need to hear every day for following Jesus is an ongoing thing which challenges all of us all the time.

. Hold on to Jesus by faith. he knows the way to eternal life and perfect happiness and peace. We do not. So, we follow him. He knows where the path goes. We do not. The path goes through suffering, through the grave on to heaven.

Our expectation of having everything our way may not be a problem when ordering hamburgers. However, when this thinking enters the church, it can be a subtle and dangerous ploy by Satan to lead us away from Christ. So is the delusion that we can be followers of Jesus without actually following Him, or following him to certain places, or follow him only when it is convenient. We can talk a lot about faith and other nice words like discipleship, but talk is cheap. As James says, "faith without works is dead." So, rather than talking about having it our way which leads to death and destruction, we have it God's way this is the good way that leads to all good things, including everlasting life. Amen.