**Jesus Sets His Face Towards Jerusalem**

**(Luke 9:51-62)**

*Jesus is resolute in living his call to love unendingly and sacrificially all the way to the finish line. Our call is to do the same, figuring out what shape that takes in these challenging times.*

***Christian Faith***

Here we go again…getting out of bed on Sunday and instead of working in the backyard or relaxing in the living room, or around the pool, or in front of the tv…and instead going to church to sit on a hard bench pew, sing a few songs, shake hands and say “peace of Christ be with you,” and then listen to words written a couple thousand years ago and be forced to deal with Jesus again. Week after week this goes on. Life would be a whole lot easier, maybe, if I didn’t have weekly encounters with Jesus. Yet, here we are, engaging in this increasingly odd practice of gathering together on a Sunday in an old building, eschewing other options. Maybe, I want to believe, we recognize in the murkiness of our souls that “something’s happening here, what it is ain’t exactly clear.” Somehow this confrontation with Jesus together with you, my sister, my brother, is important for me, for you, in living this one life I’ve been granted.

Those of us who are in the latter half of life face a challenge in trying to put ourselves into the head and mind space of our youthful selves. We are tempted to rewrite history to make it conform more naturally to our 2022 selves. As best I can tell in youthful days Christian faith had a lot to do with lining up my beliefs, believing in my head correctly…and of course quickly ethics came in….be honest, obey your parents, love others, be kind and gentle…all the qualities the Galatians passage asks of us.

But over time my understanding of faith and theology has evolved. Now I think of faith as more of a journey, we are on the road, traveling, “following” Jesus. We are always reaching, stretching, trying to attain, moving forward, “following” Jesus into whatever circumstances life confronts of it. There is still a kind of “decision” involved…after all we still might sing around the campfire “I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.”

We lean into Jesus walking by the seashore, noticing some weary fishermen, and calling out to them, “hey guys, come and follow me.” And now here in Luke we hear that daunting verb “follow” three times.

***Following Jesus***

Jesus has the capacity to push our buttons prompting us to shriek in terror at his demands. No matter your theological persuasion, left or right, you are likely to say, well, right here we need to read the text literally but over here we can be more nuanced, such that we can manage to say that the real intent behind these hard words is a little more palpable for our ears.

In Luke 9 we get the hard-core Jesus. Verse 51 is kind of a pivot point in Luke’s gospel. In the first chapters we see Jesus up north in Galilee. In verse 51 Luke records that Jesus “set his face” towards Jerusalem. The gospel writer is signaling that Jesus is now moving closer and closer towards his fate in Jerusalem, to that hill just outside of town, to that rugged, wooden cross.

The southward direction will take him through a Samaritan village where his disciples, James and John, encounter rejection. These Samaritans refuse the opportunity to provide hospitality. James and John promptly go into full-blown “sons of thunder,” Elijah style mode and shout, why not bring down fire from heaven on these retrogrades? To which Jesus says, let it go, let it be, no need to exact violence on these people.

In the next scene (verses 57-62) we get some broad hints as to what “following” looks like. Following can mean not having a steady roof over your head, following is a higher priority than family obligations, following is so important you really don’t have time to say a proper good-bye to old friends back home. In this passage, following Jesus has this steel-edged, resolute, nose-to-the-grindstone, full speed ahead, no-matter-what quality to it. You’ve got to be 100 percent all in. Anything less than that just doesn’t measure up.

Well, then, given all that, what chance do I have? I mean life has an array of competing priorities and as long as we sort of have in our heads that Jesus is number one, isn’t that enough? I mean, we’ve got to pick the fruit, or give someone a ride, or prepare a meal, or walk the dog, or tend to the garden, or teach a class, or paint a picture, or take a nap, or read a book…this is life as it really is…we just can’t be as absolutist as once you put your hand on the plow you can never, ever, look back, implies.

Again, wouldn’t this whole Jesus, Christian, church thing be a lot easier if we could just believe a few assuring truisms and sing some pretty songs?

***Where do we go from here?***

I believe we can’t get around the fact that taking Jesus seriously, embracing Jesus, committing to following Jesus, is going to shape, inform, and massage the way you speak about friends and foes, the work you choose and the way you work, what you do with the resources you have. It’s going to impact how you relate in your family, In your community, and to the broader society and world.

And let it be noted that when we pause to munch on a little bread and drink a little juice, or when we have some ashes bestowed on our foreheads, or even when we sing “I have decided to follow Jesus” we are renewing our commitment to this alternative, Jesus-following way. These rituals may seem pro-forma but they are rich in meaning.

Now, let’s place this particular Lukan passage in it’s broader gospel context.

We stare at one particular text but the larger Lukan narrative reminds us that this follow Jesus call is a universal one. Early in Luke’s gospel there is a genealogy. Jesus’ ancestry is traced back to Adam, the first human…a way in which the writer is reminding us that Jesus is for everyone. And then in the book of Acts, usually attributed to Luke, we see the Jesus thing expand beyond its ethnically Jewish confines. Luke is saying the gospel message is universal in scope. The piercing call to follow can be heard and understood and interpreted in many different environments. That’s somehow a comfort for me. I’m not the only one, there are more pilgrims on this journey, and they don’t have to conform to my/our ways.

And finally, we should never grow weary in saying, we do not walk this way along. We don’t follow alone. This call to follow Jesus I accept in tandem with you my brother, my sister.

Folk singer Gillian Welch composed this beautiful tune called “Orphan Girl.”

*I am an orphan on God’s highway….*

*I have no mother, no father,*

*no sister, no brother*

*I am an orphan girl*

Sometimes that’s how it feels, walking this earthly road, trying in our faltering ways to follow Jesus, listening to his hard words, a person can feel like an “orphan girl.”

But when we are at our best we hold each other up and we walk alongside, we become the hands of Jesus to lift up, the shoulders of Jesus to weep upon.

I think of Bruce Auernheimer and Paul Reimer, each had their assigned pew and place in our hearts. They both moved away. And though they were at a distance they showed up, virtually, at church as they could, and week after week, Pastor Jon named them in his pastoral prayer, a small but important way by which we say, we are with you.

And to do this Jesus thing we need each other.

In the last stanza Gillian Welch sings

*Blessed Savior make me willing*

*And walk beside me until I’m with them*

*Be my mother, my father,*

*My sister, my brother,*

*I am an orphan girl.*

To set out on the road with Jesus, putting our hand to the plow and not looking back, we need the wisdom, encouragement, and challenge we can provide to each other. No one is alone on this journey. May it be that way among us.

Amen.

*--June 26, 2022*

*--First Mennonite Church, Reedley, California*