

I will follow Jesus, but

WNMC
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Lectionary Reading: Luke 9:51-62

Verse for Reflection: “I will follow you wherever you go.” (Luke 9:57).

Hymn of Response: Hymnal #541 “How clear is our vocation, Lord”

In our gospel reading, Luke is beginning a new section of his account of the life and teachings of Jesus, and verse 51 gives us the over-all orientation of this section: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he (that is Jesus) set his face to go to Jerusalem.” So in this middle section of Luke’s gospel we find Jesus slowly making his way to Jerusalem, and he is well aware of what awaits him on his arrival. In fact, he repeatedly tries to get his disciples to understand that when they finally get to their destination, he will be crucified (cf. Lk 18:31-4).

Very appropriately, Luke introduces this middle section, with an analysis of what it means to follow Jesus. Luke groups together three incidents concerning people who seem to be interested in becoming followers of Jesus.

The first would-be follower takes the initiative and boldly announces: “I will follow you wherever you go” (vs. 57). One would expect Jesus to say, “Wonderful,” but instead he puts a damper on this person’s positive resolve. “Remember that following me is costly,” Jesus says to this enthusiast. Jesus doesn’t want resolutions that are quickly and easily made. Instead, he tells would-be followers: “Don’t expect a life of security and ease when you follow me.”

In the second case, Jesus takes the initiative and invites someone to follow him. There is a hint of acceptance on the part of this follower. “But he said, Lord, first let me go and bury my father” (vs. 59). Note the way this sentence starts with a “but.” This word, “but,” appears several times in this passage. That is why I have entitled this homily, “I will follow Jesus, but”. This person is in effect putting off his commitment to follow Jesus. It might very well be that his father was not dead, and not even close to dying. So what he is really saying is that he first wants to fulfil the normal custom of looking after his parents until their death, and only then would he see himself as free to follow Jesus. Jesus’ response seems harsh and provocative: “Let the dead bury their own dead,” – “make up your mind, and get on with the business of following me and doing kingdom work” (vs. 60).

In the third case, we again have a person taking the initiative by announcing his resolve to follow Jesus, but he immediately follows this with another “but.” “I will follow you Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home” (vs. 61). Jesus’ response again seems a bit harsh, and I paraphrase: “You can’t follow me if your focus is backward looking.” Once you begin plowing, the only way to drive a straight furrow

is to keep looking ahead and not back. In other words, following Jesus means keeping your eyes focussed on Jesus, who is walking ahead of us.

Here it is important to guard against a possible misunderstanding of Jesus' responses to the last two persons in this trilogy. Is Jesus really saying that his followers shouldn't pay their respects to those near and dear to them? I don't think so. Elsewhere Jesus clearly teaches us that we should honour our parents and care for our families (e.g. Mark 7:1-13). So it is not a question of choosing care for our parents over against following Jesus. Rather, care for our parents needs to be subsumed under the broader imperative of following Jesus. Following Jesus includes caring for our parents, but it is important to see the latter as growing out of the former.

What does all this mean for us living in the Waterloo region in 2019? We as Mennonites are part of an Anabaptist tradition that puts a lot of emphasis on following Jesus. I want to suggest that these abbreviated stories in Luke might unsettle us a bit, if we unpack what Jesus is really saying and apply his words to our time. So what are some ways in which we today add the word "but" to the challenge of following Jesus? I believe a close reading of our text suggests some contemporary examples.

Let's first look more carefully at what follows two of the "buts" in these stories. "But first let me go and bury my father" (vs. 59). "But let me first say farewell to those at my home" (vs. 61). Did you notice that in each case a "but" is followed with the phrase, "let me". So in each case the person is really saying, "I want to set my own agenda." In each case the person wants to follow Jesus, but on his own terms. And in each case, Jesus critiques this kind of a response. Followers of Jesus are not free to define what following him means. Following Jesus should not be qualified with a "but."

I think we as Christians today are very similar to the people in our text. We too like to say "but let me," when it comes to following Jesus. We have a lot of trouble accepting the very idea submitting to an authority and being a follower. We prefer the modern notion of autonomy which flies in the face of any suggestions that we need to submit to Jesus. This mindset is so well illustrated in the obnoxious television ad for National Car Rental where a big man with a booming voice says, "I like to be in control." Genuine followers of Jesus say God is ultimately in control. Followers of Jesus should be followers of Jesus — full stop! No ifs or buts allowed.

For some additional examples of ways in which we today try to add our own qualifications to following Jesus, I want to back up a bit and look at the first part of our reading in Luke. Remember, in this section of Luke, Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. The first part of the journey takes Jesus and his disciples through Samaria. In our reading we find Jesus instructing his disciples to go on ahead to the next village to prepare for his entry into the village.

And then we encounter the first use of the word "but" in this passage. The advance team of disciples enter the village of the Samaritans to prepare the way for Jesus, "but they did not receive him," we are told, "because his face was set toward Jerusalem" (53). The reason for this rejection probably had less to do with geography

and more to do with the fact that Jesus was a Jew on his way to Jerusalem. Or, perhaps they knew about Jesus and his message, and they wanted nothing to do with him. So we really have here another response to the possibility of following Jesus – outright rejection.

James and John are incensed and dare to suggest to Jesus that they command fire to come down from heaven and consume these people (vs. 54). Note carefully, how Jesus responds. He **rebukes** James and John for even thinking about punishing these people, and then Jesus and his disciples simply move on to another village (vss. 55-6). Jesus allows people to say “no” to him.

Now we are in a position to do some application. There are Christians today who like to define following Jesus primarily in terms of obeying the Great Commission and doing evangelism. So urgent is this task, and so important is the gospel message, that they will do anything and everything in order to persuade people to be saved. Tobi Thiessen gives a good example of this in her editorial in a recent issue of the *Canadian Mennonite*.

Such people need to be reminded of Jesus’ response to James and John who couldn’t tolerate people who said “no” to Jesus. Jesus rebuked them and moved on to another village. Followers of Jesus do not set their own parameters on how to do evangelism. We follow Jesus’ example and respect the freedom of each and every person to say “no” to the message of Jesus, and to our attempts to proclaim this message.

But here there is a danger of over-reacting. I believe there are many Christians today who find those who use aggressive ways to do evangelism so offensive that they simply reject the very idea of doing any evangelism. And so once again we have Christians who qualify what it means to follow Jesus with a “but.” I want to follow Jesus, but don’t expect me to do any evangelism.

But, surely, if we are followers of Jesus, we should follow Jesus’ own example of spreading the Good News. We can’t just dismiss the Great Commission Jesus gave us. In fact, Jesus addresses this very issue in our text in his response to the second would-be follower: “Let the dead bury their own dead; **but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God,**” he says in verse 60. So, if we want to be faithful followers of Jesus, we are going to have to be involved in proclaiming the Good News about the kingdom of God. No arbitrary exclusions allowed as to what it means to follow Jesus.

Jesus’ reference to the kingdom of God invites closer inspection. In fact, Jesus refers to the kingdom of God again in his response to the third person who said he wanted to follow Jesus, but then added a “but.” Jesus says to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is **fit for the kingdom of God**” (vs. 62). Indeed Jesus makes over 50 references to the kingdom of God in the gospels.

Sadly, there are any number of ways in which Christians today add another “but” to following Jesus by failing to take into account what Jesus said about the kingdom of God. Note first of all that Jesus instructs the second would-be follower to “go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (vs. 60). Here we are once again dealing with the subject

of evangelism, but the focus now is on the **message** being proclaimed when we do evangelism. The gospel message, the good news is about the kingdom of God.

Sadly, there are all too many Christians who fail to say anything about the kingdom of God when they do evangelism. For them the gospel message only has to do with personal sin and salvation and escaping hell. This I suggest is another failure in following the teachings and the example of Jesus.

At the same time, there are some Christians who think the gospel message is **only** about the kingdom of God. This, I suggest, is also an arbitrary restriction as to what evangelism is and what it means to follow Jesus. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Here Jesus links the language of being born again with the kingdom of God. Faithful followers of Jesus must do the same.

But there is more here. I think we as Christians today have a lot of trouble accepting the very idea of a kingdom where God rules and sets the standards of what is right and wrong. This is surely part of the meaning of the kingdom of God. Remember the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). The notion of the kingdom of God is a way of summing up God's ideal for the way in which things should be done here on earth in every sphere of human existence.

Of course, determining what God's right way is for every sphere of human existence is sometimes not immediately straightforward, but there are clues in Scripture and in Jesus' own teaching. And I would suggest that we would find it a lot easier to discern what is right and wrong if we first of all settle the prior question as to whether we are really willing to submit to God's rule and his kingdom..

Here again I find that all too often Christians add their own qualifications to what it means to follow Jesus and his teachings about the kingdom of God. Some Christians have been shaped to such an extent by the relativistic ethos of our time that they reject the very idea of the kingdom of God, or a right way of doing things. Some Christians are selective – they admit that there are some areas where there is a right way of doing things, but they are silent about other areas.

I want to suggest that these are again a betrayal of what it means to follow Jesus. Here again we are qualifying our commitment to follow Jesus with a "but". We are demanding that we ourselves want to determine what is right and wrong.

Well, I could go on to describe some other ways in which we today think we can pick and choose what it means to be a follower of Jesus. But I will stop here, and suggest this as a topic for your dinner conversation.

The central point I have been making is that if we see ourselves as followers of Jesus, then we need to be committed to **really** following Jesus. It is Jesus who should determine our agenda. It is wrong to say, "I will follow Jesus, but". Genuine followers of Jesus try their very best to accept all that Jesus taught and they try to obey him in everything.

But how can we achieve this? How can we avoid adding our own qualifications to being a follower of Jesus? Just a few brief suggestions by way of conclusion.

First, we need to have a strong desire to be a follower of Jesus. With Paul we need to say, “For me to live is Christ ... I want to know Christ.... I want to be like Christ” (Phil 1:21, 3:10).

Next, we need to cultivate the virtues of open-mindedness and intellectual humility. We need to ask God’s Spirit to help us see where we are not being consistent in following Jesus. We need to pray that God’s spirit will point out the blind spots in our own self-understanding. We need to learn to think critically about our present understanding of what it means to follow Jesus. Maybe, just maybe, we still have more to learn about what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ.

We also need to evaluate our reading habits. We need to keep studying the gospels to determine what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We also need to make sure that our thinking is not being shaped more by the intellectual ethos of the society around us, than by a worldview grounded in God’s word.

Finally, we need to remember Jesus’ words: “My sheep hear my voiceand they follow me” (John 10:27). May God help us to hear Jesus’ words and follow him. Amen.