

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JUNE 26, 2022

1 KINGS 19:15-16, 19-21 | PSALM 16 | GALATIANS 5:1, 13-25 | LUKE 9:51-62

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “The call to follow implies that there is only one way of believing in Jesus Christ, and that is by leaving all and going with the incarnate Son of God.”¹

Following means leaving. And it’s the leaving that’s the hard part.

Today’s gospel reading is all about people who love following. A man tells Jesus that he is willing to follow him and proclaim the kingdom of God. He even says that he’ll go anywhere Jesus wants him to go, but he wants to settle down somewhere. Another claims that he is ready to follow Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, but he just has to say goodbye to his family first. Another will be one of the greatest disciples ever, but he has to go bury his father.

The issue for these disciples is not their commitment to following. It’s their hesitation about leaving. And so their enthusiasm is met with a word of caution. *No one who has once grasped the plow yet keeps looking backwards is fit for the kingdom of God.*

That image—beautiful but also haunting—comes from today’s first reading from the Hebrew Bible. Elisha is out plowing the field with his oxen when the prophet Elijah throws his mantle over him. This seemingly bizarre gesture is a way of calling Elisha to join in his ministry. So what does Elisha do? He agrees. He accepts the call. He goes home to say goodbye to his family. And then he does something fascinating. Elisha slaughters his oxen and gives them away in a big feast.

Why does the author tell us that? It could be that Elisha is generous. It could be that Elisha knows a lot of people and can throw a big party. It could be that the oxen are really big. But it’s probably something deeper than that. That when Elisha accepts this new calling, he leaves his old way of life behind. And just to underline the point, he gets rid of the fallback plan. He leaving his past life behind him.

We leave something behind so that we can bring our entire selves into God’s service. The call to follow is not a call to give an hour of our time or a sliver of our life. These are the parts of my life that are for God, these are the parts that are for me. The calling that comes to Elisha, to the people in today’s gospel reading, and to all of us puts everything in the service of God’s action. *No one who has once grasped the plow yet keeps looking backwards is fit for the kingdom of God.*

There is an obvious but counterproductive way to interpret this. Which is to say that the way to follow Jesus is to minimize your connections and relationships with anyone else around you. That following Jesus means leaving behind any responsibility you might have toward another person. But we know we serve God

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Fortress Press, 1991), 171.

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through our relationships and in our communities. So the question isn't *Which individuals can I throw overboard so I can follow Jesus better? How can I make someone else bury the dead? How can I get out of responsibility for my family?*

The better questions for us are *What parts of my life am I trying to keep Jesus from redeeming? What are the parts of my life that I try to keep Jesus away from, not because I'm embarrassed by them, but because I don't want them to change? What are the limits we put around God's calling on our lives?*

Like the people in today's gospel reading, our zeal for following is often paired with a hesitation about leaving. I'll follow Jesus anywhere, but only as long as I like the people. I'll follow Jesus anywhere, but only as long as I'm getting something out of it. I'll follow Jesus anywhere, but only if I can keep an eye on my oxen.

Jesus doesn't just invite us to come and follow, but he gives us the courage to leave behind everything that prevents us from serving God and our neighbors. What does Christ free us from? On Sunday mornings, we've been using a form of confession that gives us some ideas. Jesus frees us from our lack of gratitude, our belief that the world is here to serve our needs, our indifference to the poor, our neglect of God's creation, and our excessive consumption. That's not a bad start.

Can you receive the kingdom of God while you hold that your life is just the sum of your own efforts? Can you receive the kingdom of God while you hold that creation is just a means to an end? Can you receive the kingdom of God while you hold that the poor dealt their own lot? The answer, Jesus tells us, is no. As long as you believe that life is to be achieved, that resources are to be hoarded, and that other people are a threat, the kingdom of God isn't going to sound like good news.

Following Jesus toward the kingdom of God means leaving that behind. And it's terribly difficult. I don't know about you, but most days I have one hand on the plow and two eyes looking back over my shoulder. Following is easy. Leaving is harder. *No one who has once grasped the plow yet keeps looking backwards is fit for the kingdom of God.*

There's a story that I've heard Bishop Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, tell before that's a beautiful illustration of this. He's a parish pastor in Chicago at the time. And this man comes to him and says he wants to talk to him about something. So they set up a meeting, and the man says that he wants to be baptized. And Bishop Curry says that's great, and they can do it at worship next Sunday. And the man says, "No, we need to do this in private." That's not the usual practice, so Bishop Curry asks why they can't do it normally during worship when everyone's there. And the man says, "Because of where I live, I'm in a gang. And there are people who would hurt me if they knew I was talking to you. But I need to find a different way to live."

And Bishop Curry recalls that they did the baptism in private at the church. And they got to the first set of questions. "Do you renounce the devil and all the

forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, and the ways of sin that draw you from God?” And the man replied, “I renounce them.” In other words, “I leave them behind.”

And Bishop Curry recalls that he had never heard those words that way before. That the invitation to leave something behind, wasn't a command. It was life-giving. It meant freedom. It meant transformation. To this man, it was gospel.

No one who has once grasped the plow yet keeps looking backwards is fit for the kingdom of God. And so Jesus keeps working on us. Whenever we inevitably turn back to indifference, ungratefulness, and self-centeredness, Jesus comes alongside us with the same invitation. Eyes up here. Come follow me.

Jesus is making us fit for the kingdom.

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