

NO TURNING BACK – Luke 9: 51-62

Greetings once again in the precious name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

When I was a young boy, a new outdoor swimming pool was built in Reservoir, where I lived. The new swimming pool had a toddler's wading pool, a two-foot-deep children's pool, and an Olympic size eight-lane swimming pool that graduated from three feet six inches to six feet deep.

The diving pool was ten-foot-six-inches deep with a 9-foot-high diving board as well as two smaller 3-foot-high diving boards. Kids lined up in a constantly moving stream to jump off the lower boards, but the high diving board was used by experienced divers only, though there were lots of kids who used the high diving board.

My swimming teacher had taught me how to dive off the edge of the 6-foot-deep pool, and we had practiced that same technique for diving off the lower boards during our swimming lessons. Then one day, the swimming teacher asked "Who thinks they are ready to dive off the high diving board?"

Several kids jumped at the chance. Not me. I wasn't that brave. I wasn't alone, either. Therefore, most of us watched from the edge of the pool as a few of our friends climbed the nine-foot ladder one at a time and practiced diving from the high board.

But you know, there's something the teacher doesn't tell you when you raise your hand to try this new experience. The teacher doesn't tell you that once your toes hit the bottom rung of that nine-foot ladder, there's no turning back. Once you get out onto the diving board itself, there is a queue of others behind you and you only one way to get off of it. You have to jump, or dive.

You've reached the point of no return. You have to go all in. The very first time I dived off the high board, I did a belly whacker, and my tummy was red and sore. However, I did learn over time to dive properly into the pool from the high board.

In today's reading, Jesus and his disciples are beginning their final journey to Jerusalem. Earlier in the ninth chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus has sent the disciples out in pairs to preach the Kingdom of God. He's fed the five thousand and he's met with Moses and Elijah on the mountain of Transfiguration.

To break up a fight among his disciples over who would be the greatest, he has made an example of a small child and said, "Whoever is least among you will be the greatest of all." Jesus was making it clearer and clearer that following him requires more than gently falling into the water from the edge of the pool.

There comes a time when you reach the point of no return. You have to go all in. Luke's narrative of Jesus' journey to the cross begins in today's Bible reading as Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem", and concludes nearly ten chapters later in chapter 19 verse 27 with Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem."

Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He's passed the point of no return. Luke sets together two stories at the beginning of this journey that don't seem to be related to each other; the story of the way the disciples respond to the Samaritans' rejection, and the story of those who want to follow Jesus, but aren't ready to fully commit.

As we look carefully at these two stories, we have to ask why Luke links them together in this way, and what this means for us. It's a long journey through these ten chapters of Luke's gospel, but no matter how much time it takes, we have to keep in mind where the final destination will be.

We will end up in Jerusalem, where Jesus will be betrayed, tried, tortured, and executed, where he will rise again from death, and where his disciples will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit after he has ascended into heaven.

Jerusalem will be the centre of activity for the early church. It is the geographic location that connects the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah with the New Testament reality of Christ's coming and the new life Jesus introduces into the world.

That new life is a complete upset of everything that has gone before. Richard Shaffer wrote "Adopting a life of discipleship cannot be a part-time or momentary commitment. It is a life-changing shift in direction and priorities."

The gospels are filled with examples of people who've made that shift. We read story after story of people who have surrendered everything to follow Jesus. You'd think that, after living with Jesus for three years, his closest friends would be perfect examples of the impact such a life-changing shift can have. But you'd be wrong.

James and John have just argued over who will be greatest in Christ's kingdom. They have been jockeying for positions of power next to Jesus. Therefore, when they come into the Samaritan village as the advance team, getting things ready for Jesus to come to preach and heal, they already have a chip on their shoulders.

They apparently didn't quite hear Jesus telling them they needed to become like little children. Or maybe, in their smug self-righteousness, they just assumed Jesus was talking to the other disciples.

When the Samaritans turn James and John away because they aren't happy their village is just a pit stop on the way to Jerusalem, the disciples are offended. Why? It's because the Samaritans are offended. Do you see how this escalates?

We see it on social media all the time! People get offended by the way other people get offended, and before you know it, people are calling down fire from heaven on others, convinced that only they know the right path, the right understanding, the right truth.

Luke gives us another possibility. In the second section of this passage, we see a parade of would-be Jesus followers who each have some obstacle preventing them from going all in. Some of these obstacles sound like genuine issues, worthy of some grace from Jesus. It's a little shocking to hear him raise the bar, instead of lowering it. As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus,

"I will follow you wherever you go." He is ready to follow Jesus, until it's clear there won't be any stops at fine hotels or restaurants. This will be more like camping without a tent or a sleeping bag. Following Jesus isn't going to be glamorous.

Jesus says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Another would-be follower is ready to follow Jesus, just as soon as his father dies and he can settle the estate.

We don't know if his father is already near death, or at the peak of health at the moment. Behind the concern with delay lies a more basic issue, one concerning priority of claim and allegiance. The request to delay discipleship misses the point of this commitment.

Following Jesus means leaving one's family and household to join a new family, a family not located in a household, but in the mobile, boundary-breaking realm of God. Jesus' insistence is extreme and unrelenting.

Jesus says: "Let the dead bury their own dead". Abandon your spiritually dead family and let them bury their own physically dead. This makes the point that no other claim or allegiance, not even socially expected divinely legitimate duties, can take precedence over one's commitment to the work of God's reign.

Freed from duty, even sacred duty, to parents, the seeker should take on the role of a disciple, pointing to the powerful arrival of God's rule. Jesus adds, "But as for you, Go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Notice that Jesus first invites this would be disciple to follow him, but ends up saying "Go", not "Come."

In this exchange, as in the next one, a potential disciple asks permission to delay the start of active commitment to discipleship. However, Jesus refuses to give permission.

Then we get the one wanting to say goodbye to his family before setting out to follow Jesus. This reminds us of the story of Elisha in our first Old Testament reading this morning, where Elisha was busy ploughing with his team of oxen when Elijah called him into service.

Jesus acts with authority that commands radical obedience, insisting on parting of the ways. Not even a ceremony of leave-taking is allowed! Here, Jesus distances himself from the more lenient response of Elijah to the similar request made by Elisha. The claim of God's realm on the would-be disciple is immediate and may not to be evaded or delayed by appeal to family ties.

Jesus says "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Having drawn a lesson from the activities of wild animals, foxes, to instruct the first seeker, Jesus now points to a common-sense farming wisdom to portray discipleship as single-minded detachment from the life and social systems one has known.

A farmer who is ploughing a field must look ahead rather than backward. Jesus means that the field is already being prepared for planting. A plentiful harvest is at hand. More harvesters are needed.

Today's reading tells of the single-mindedness of purpose that is prompted by God's profound love for humanity and for all the world.

Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. Nothing is going to stop him from getting there. Not a village full of grudging Samaritans, or a couple of power-hungry fishermen. Not a long line of would-be disciples who aren't ready to go all in just yet. Not you, not me, or anyone else.

Jesus is determined to do what he came to do. He knows his mission, and nothing will stop him from fulfilling it. Why is Jesus so focused, so intent on getting to Jerusalem?

- Because, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not perish but have eternal life.
- Because, Jesus can see that even his closest friends, who should know by now how to live in a radically different way, are still stuck in the world's way of calling down fire on people who reject them.
- Because, Jesus understands the desire of those would-be followers, and he knows their desire can never be matched by commitment without his help.

- Because, Jesus sees you and me, as we struggle to love people we think are wrong without judging them.

Jesus sees how we fail at this time and time again. Jesus knows that, unless he gets to Jerusalem to complete his mission, we will be stuck forever in a world where arguments over who is in and who is out can tear churches apart, where people who should be showing the world what it means to love each other as Christ loved you, can only show the world how wrapped up we are in our own needs and desires.

Unless he gets to Jerusalem, Jesus knows that we will never know just how deeply God loves us. That's why his face is set. There is no turning back!

I can remember singing the song, "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" when I was a boy. It was easy to learn, because each verse repeated a simple phrase:

I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me. No turning back, no turning back.

Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back.

Will you decide now to follow Jesus? No turning back, no turning back.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we want to follow you with all our hearts. But it seems like something is always getting in our way of going all in. We get angry when others don't see things the same way we do. Forgive our self-righteous indignation, and teach us to love as you love. We want to follow you, but not before we take care of our personal business.

We think we need to clean up our act before we can identify ourselves as Christ's followers. We forget that cleaning up our act is your specialty, not ours, and it's only when we fully surrender to you that you can begin to do that good work in us. Lord, we want to follow you without reservation.

Give us hearts that are wholly devoted to you. Give us the will to give up our will to you. Give us the desire to keep you constantly in front of us, no turning back, no turning back. Amen.