

June 26, 2022
 Third Sunday after Pentecost
 Sermon #3
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Good Morning. GOOD MORNING! It is so good to be among you after several weeks away. I had a small vacation from school over Memorial Day and then was away attending summer intensive classes at Luther Seminary. I've been gone almost three weeks and I have missed you and been praying for you in my absence. I hope you have been praying for me as well. I won't be presumptuous and ask if you missed me. I might not like some of the answers!

Today's gospel asks us what it might mean to be a follower of Jesus. What might it mean to be a disciple of Christ? In today's text, we might not like Jesus' answers. The cost might be too high. The gospel seems too radical. You might be inclined to say, "Well, that was for the apostles in the Bible, not for me." But what if? What if it wasn't just for people who lived long ago, who saw Jesus face to face? What if Jesus was asking us these things too?

When I am faced with such a harsh Jesus, such a demanding Messiah, I may find myself not wanting to be a disciple at all. Maybe you, like me, would settle on the idea of being a fan of Jesus rather than disciple. A hanger-on to see what Jesus does next, rather than a saint. I have no interest in being a saint! I have always subscribed to spiritual progress, rather than spiritual perfection. Being a fan of Jesus might be like being a Mariners fan, we watch some games, we have a t-shirt. We can admit they had a terrible start to the season, but their offense looks great this year. We might find it mildly embarrassing to be identified as a fan in a crowd of strangers, but it doesn't cost us that much. Being a fan gives us a good feeling, a sense of being on the team. Team Jesus. GO Jesus!

Now, it's always a good idea, when reading the Bible, to ask yourself, "So what is the situation?" What is going on here? Where are we at in the story? We might call this context. Remember, we as Lutherans

read the Bible contextually, we don't pluck out a verse to win an argument or prove a point. We consider the words around verses. As Pr. Jana likes to say, "We as Lutherans don't use Bible bullets to shoot verses back at someone." That isn't what the Bible is for. That isn't what our faith is for.

What is going on with Jesus today, that he suddenly seems to get cranky and demanding with people who say they want to follow him? Luke 9:51 says, "When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." What is drawing near? What does "to be taken up" mean? Why is Jesus "setting his face toward Jerusalem?"

You and I already know the end of this story. We know Jesus will go to Jerusalem to be tried, tortured, executed, and buried. We know what is waiting. With this in mind, we can see what is drawing near, the end of Jesus' ministry and life. We can read "to be taken up" with this understanding as well. Jesus will be taken up before Pilate, his tortured body will be taken up and crucified on the cross. But we also know Jesus will be taken up into new life when he rises from the dead. Jesus will be taken up when he ascends to heaven after the resurrection.

Make no mistake, we as Christians know that our story does not end in a tomb. We know that on the other side of death, we will be taken up to new life.

It can be so easy to forget that Jesus isn't just calling us to the tomb; to a life of hardship; to a life without joy while we serve our neighbor. It can be so easy to forget when we face our losses and difficulties and various kinds of death. We simply decide the price is too high. That the cost is too great. That we really aren't cut out for the work. Who wants to be a follower of that?

Jesus knew what was coming, and he set his face toward Jerusalem knowing what it would cost. He made a decision. He reoriented his life, literally the path he was traveling, to take him toward all that

was to come. Knowing this, I'm more willing to be a fan of Jesus on most days rather than a disciple. I would line up along the road saying, "Go Jesus. I believe in you!" or "You've got this Jesus! I am praying for you!" But I don't want to go to Jerusalem. Do you?

Jesus makes a decision too, to walk the walk. This is immediately followed by a Samaritan village that wants nothing to do with Jesus going to Jerusalem. Now, there was religious tensions at the time between Samaria (home of the Samaritans) and Judea (home of the Jews and Jerusalem). But the point is, the Samaritans didn't want anything to do with Jesus, especially if he was heading to Jerusalem. They don't need a Messiah who was going to get into all of that. I can definitely see the Samaritan point of view. No thanks! We dodged that bullet they think, and we think too.

But sometimes in our lives, we don't have a choice to ignore the hard parts. Sometimes it seems like there is hardly any choice at all. We all have moments where we face loss, and we don't know what to do. A medical diagnosis. The end of a relationship. Unthinkable tragedy. There are times in our lives that if we decide to face the truth about our life or ourselves we might lose everything. A lie we can no longer keep telling. An addiction. Even something like depression where we just can't go on anymore. So involved with the shock, the trauma, and the pain that we feel just like Jesus if he goes to Jerusalem. We forget what happens after the crucifixion. We only see the tomb.

There have been places in my own life where I have faced the same dilemma. Where facing the truth about myself, about my life, cost me everything that I had known and loved. Walking into that truth seemed like a tomb. I couldn't see any life beyond it. For me, one instance of this was when I realized I was gay and couldn't avoid it any longer. I needed to tell the truth about myself, about who I was to those closest to me. But I also knew that it might cost me my whole world. And it did.

Like I have preached before, me coming out was an apocalypse for my family. For my religious faith. For my community. Rural

Montana in 1996 could not receive my truth. The church I belonged to had no place for me at the table. My family said they didn't know me, because I was not their son. Not the person they had raised me to be. My whole life that had come before, lay in the tomb. It was lost to me. And I was lost to it. I was lost to the people who had given birth to me, raised me, loved me and took me to church my entire life. A third of the people in my hometown stopped talking to my family, colleagues, neighbors, longtime friends. Doors were shut-in my face. In my family's face. My best friend, the one I had spent every week of my entire childhood with, was forbidden to ever see me again by their parents. No one could unsay or ignore what I had said. What they had heard. What we all finally knew to be true.

In the gospel today, those who say they would follow Jesus are then asked to do what seems impossible by Christ. Jesus says, if you really want to follow me to Jerusalem know that it means **rejection and maybe being homeless**, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus tells his potential followers that they must be **willing to give up their familial traditions and duties**, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Jesus says once we begin to head toward Jerusalem, there can be no going back, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Who would ever want to do this? Not me! Not if I had any choice. Not if it ends in the tomb.

Where does that leave us? What are we to do? Exactly. What are we to do? This is one of the points that the Gospel of Luke is asking us readers, us listeners, us fans of Jesus today. Do you notice how we never hear those potential followers' replies? Do you notice how Jesus makes those seemingly impossible demands and then the demands just hang there waiting to be answered? Not just by the people in the story, but maybe answered by us as well? Are we willing?

If following Jesus ended in the tomb, I couldn't follow. I wouldn't go. And yet, I could not stop hearing God's call for my own life, to become my authentic self. I could not say no to that tugging at my

heart toward the truth, even if no one else could understand it at the time. If the cost of discipleship only ended in loss, there would be no point. But we know, Jesus' story and our story doesn't end in the tomb. Jesus rises from the dead. Jesus is always going about doing his Father's business, which is, as we know bringing new life. To the tombs. To our losses. To all of the dead places. To where everything in our lives seems hopeless and beyond saving.

We know that we aren't just headed to Jerusalem. No. We might be heading to the tomb now, but the resurrection is just around the corner. We aren't asked to give up what we know for sure now, our present circumstances, without God's promise that new life awaits us. Better things are to come. We are an Easter people. We follow Jesus not only on Good Friday, but on Easter Sunday as well. And He is Risen. He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia! ALLELUIA!

So too with us. So too with me. I could not anticipate what my life would be like on the other side of coming out. All I knew is that it might cost me everything. But I knew that I was being called to live into my truth, into the fullness of new life that God had waiting for me on the other side of the grave. On the other side of my fears. On the other side of the lies I kept telling people about who I was. On the other side of everything that came before.

If I had not come out, I would not be with you here today. If I had not come out, I could never live into the whole person God was calling me to be. If I hadn't come out, I would have gone down to the grave and remained there. My shame and my fear would have swallowed me up. I would have taken my own life, in that seemingly hopeless place of lying to myself and to everyone I knew. I could have easily done it. I have known many people who have, and their families. I know many families today who are missing their children, their loved ones, and their relatives and their friends because their LGBTQ loved ones could not see beyond the tomb. Their families could not see anything beyond the tomb. Their churches could not see anything beyond the tomb.

It could have easily been me, and my family too. Facing the tomb with no hope of new life on the other side. If I had not walked into the truth of who I was called to be—into the new life I couldn't see yet. If I had not come out, I would not be proclaiming God's good news to you today. Good news for me and for you. For my family and yours. Good news for all of us. That our God really is the Resurrection and Life. That our God has come to give us new life on the other side of the grave. Not the same life, not in the same measure, but New Life, an Abundant Life. Grace upon grace, at the last minute and when we most dearly need it. Given without merit to you and me. Given to all of us without merit and without measure.

In closing, let me remind you that Easter has finally come and you and I are Easter people! This is God's promise to each of us. This is God's call to those potential disciples along the road. Are you content being a fan? Are you happy cheering from the stands? It's for you to answer. Will you follow Jesus? Will you step forward onto the road, into new life?