

## COME AND FOLLOW: Letting Go of Excuses

Pastor Bonita Wood

Luke 9:57-62

February 21, 2010

*I have an aunt who as I was growing up was the queen of excuses. You see she had a son and daughter who were close in age to my brothers and me. So we would spend the night with them often. And they would spend the night with us rarely. You know how when you were growing up you loved to spend the night at some place other than your own home. Well that is what we did and we had a lot of fun. But whenever we wanted our cousins to stay with us my Aunt would always come up with some excuse. Some of her excuses were the usual – the kids had homework to do, one or the other of them was in trouble and so they were not allowed to stay, they had to go to some place like the doctor’s first thing in the morning and so they couldn’t stay. But my favorite one – the all-time winner - was the time she wouldn’t let them stay because they had to take the trash out. I was like – “you have got to be kidding” – they can’t stay because the trash needs emptied. That was the dumbest thing I ever heard. Nevertheless they didn’t stay.*

Now I don’t want to be too harsh on my aunt because when I started writing this sermon on letting go of excuses and thinking back over some of the excuses I have offered for various reasons, some of them sound pretty dumb too. And something tells me I am not alone in this.

Today I want us to take a look at excuses.

Excuses of why we don’t follow Jesus as we should or wish we could or we would if only...Excuses that keep Jesus from being our first priority in life.

You see today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent.

Lent is a season of 40 days, not counting Sundays, which begins on Ash Wednesday with ashes pressed upon our heads as many of you experienced this past Wednesday.

It ends on Holy Saturday with the triumphant song “Christ the Lord is Risen!”

And we celebrate that victory on Easter Sunday.

Basically the Lenten season is a preparation for celebrating Easter.

Lent comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *lencten*, which means “spring.”

I think that alone is reason enough to celebrate the season this year just to be one step closer to spring, don’t you!

Lent is:

a time of self-denial and return to disciplined living;

a time to repent and experience God’s extravagant forgiveness and mercy;

a time to be set free from past patterns of self-indulgence and negative behavior;

a time to embrace a life of joyful holiness.

The pattern of Lent was set by Jesus during his forty days of solitude, prayer and fasting in the Judean desert. This was an essential period of preparation for his public ministry.

And, throughout his ministry, Jesus urged those who wanted to become his followers to **"deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."**

### **COME AND FOLLOW**

Sounds easy enough until you really start to count the cost. Then the excuses start to come in to play don't they. God, there are all these reasons or excuses of why I cannot lay my life at your feet and follow and trust you. God, I cannot really do what you have asked me to do because I have all these great reasons. God, if you just wait a little while longer, my life will be in a place that I can do what you ask of me. Sound familiar?

Don't feel all alone in this – people have been coming up with excuses not to follow Jesus – at least not to follow him completely and whole-heartedly - since Jesus first asked them to COME AND FOLLOW.

Look with me at Luke 9:57-62 pg \_\_\_\_\_

As you are turning to that passage, let me explain that Luke begins an extended section of his gospel here that has as its theme Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. This section, which extends through chapter 18 and parts of 19, presents the teaching and parables of Jesus, that for the most part, focus on the cost of discipleship and the coming suffering that Jesus would endure. You see Jesus was preparing his disciples for the rejection, suffering and death that he would experience. Jesus knows his time with his disciples is growing to a close. So through every word he speaks to them, he is trying to prepare them to become the leaders they will need to be in order to spread the gospel after Jesus is gone. He wants them to understand that he has not come in judgment but instead to offer the gospel message of salvation. However, the way of salvation – following Jesus – is not easy. It requires extreme sacrifice – subordinating all other obligations to the cause of Christ. In other words, Christ comes first – before ALL else. Jesus is calling us today for the very same reason and we need to understand that he wants the same complete devotion from us that he did his early disciples. Jesus does not ask for a couple of hours on Sunday; he desires all of a person's resources, talents, and time to be placed in his service. He is to be our top priority.

So let's listen to what Luke has to say:

Read 9:57-62

In this passage, we see Jesus on a journey – it says **"they were going along the road"** – and we see his encounter with three would-be followers. As we read about these three, it would almost seem as if Jesus is trying to dissuade each of them from following him. That is not the case. It the desire of his heart, of God's heart that everyone follow him. Jesus is just pointing out to each of these would-be followers, to his disciples that are with him on his journey and to each of us today – **That to follow Jesus will cost something.** Jesus' replies makes one ask the question,

**"What does the Lord expect of those who seek to follow Him?"**

To the first would-be follower Jesus points out that, a person must be willing to put aside worldly security. To be Jesus disciple, in the context of his present ministry in this passage, meant that you may not even have a warm comfortable place to lay your head at night, you would not be welcomed everywhere you went with him, you would experience suffering and rejection. To be a follower of Jesus entails a degree of separation and isolation from the world. The Apostle Paul called it being “strangers in the world.” (I Peter 1:1)

Remember I told you Jesus is on a journey – a journey to Jerusalem that will end in his crucifixion. **The way of Christ is the way of the cross.** It costs something – maybe even suffering and persecution. In North America, we do not truly experience persecution for our faith, but there are many who still do in other parts of the world. So in essence Jesus is asking, “Will you sacrifice comfort, security, health and perhaps even life for me?”

The second would-be follower explains that before he follows Jesus, he must first bury his father. There is debate between scholars of whether the man meant his father was actually dead and he needed to finish the funeral, which seems the more unlikely, or if the man is just asking to wait to follow Jesus until his aged father dies, which would be an indefinite amount of time. Both the burying and the taking care of an aged father were highly held traditional practices back then and were not to be violated. So for whichever reason the man was asking, he was asking to do it **first**. Jesus basically tells him that Jesus must be his first priority, even above family loyalty, above all human loyalties. Jesus was not trying to be heartless, he just wants each of us to examine our primary loyalty – is it to Jesus or to something else...money, sports, family, work – which excuse is more important than Jesus?

The 3<sup>rd</sup> would-be follower wanted to tell his family good-bye first. To say good-bye to one’s family in the culture of the time meant asking one’s father for permission, in this case, to follow Jesus. The father’s authority was supreme in the Eastern tradition – he would always have the final say. This would-be disciple wanted to get dad’s ok before following the Lord. Jesus, however, accepts no higher authority. Loyalty to him was far above loyalty to one’s father or any cultural family traditions. He replied, “**No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.**” You cannot plow a straight furrow in the soil by looking back. We can’t whole-heartedly live for Jesus and keep looking back or have constant second thoughts and reservations. You must be ready to serve, even when it requires sacrifice. Don’t wait for a better time to follow and serve Jesus – he is calling to you today, right now.

During this Lenten season that is exactly what Jesus is doing. He is calling each one of us to follow him, to count the cost, let go of our excuses and make our decision, and he is praying that it will be to whole-heartedly follow him, right now.

Our Bishop, Bishop Bruce Ough says:

*Jesus is calling us to live as he did. Jesus is calling us to deny our preferences for the sake of His kingdom purposes. Jesus is calling us to die to our selfishness so that others may have a more abundant life. Jesus is calling us to address the problems and issues people face - disease, poverty,*

*prejudice, hunger, loneliness, hatred, fear, sin-sick hearts - with an extravagant generosity, compassion and love that the world will consider strange and wonderful.*

*Jesus is calling us to live out of God's abundance,  
when the world says hoard your resources.*

*Jesus is calling us to witness for peace,  
when the world is mad with war and violence.*

*Jesus is calling us to seek justice,  
when the world says look out for yourself.*

*Jesus is calling us to proclaim hope,  
when the world embraces doubt, despair and cynicism.*

*Jesus is calling us to offer salvation,  
when the world offers false security*

Jesus is calling us – but there is a cost and we need to count it.

So what are the benefits of living like this?

Why should Christ be our first and utmost priority?

There's an old saying that goes, "There's no satisfaction like soul satisfaction."

Unwavering commitment to Jesus Christ will reap for us such satisfaction – soul satisfaction. **That, in part, is the reward – the blessing so-to-speak.**

Following Christ whole-heartedly means we will impact people for God in more powerful ways than we could ever have imagined. **That's the reward. That's the blessing.** If Christ is our utmost priority we are in for an adventure of a lifetime! There's no roller-coaster on this planet that can give us a thrill like being a Christian 100% in love with Christ and on fire for Him! And when our ride with Christ on earth runs out, the fringe benefits get even better – they are indeed out of this world. **Heaven is the reward.** That's why Paul could proclaim, **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21)."**

Is it easy? No way! Will I need to sacrifice things in my life? You bet! Will I suffer?

Maybe. However, no great success comes without sacrifice.

Think of the Olympic athletes we have been watching on television this past week. Do you think they got there without sacrificing much? Do you think it was easy for them to get to where they are today or do you believe it took a lot of perseverance and dedication? Do you think they entered into their fields of sports without first counting the cost?

How about being a parent?

Have you sacrificed? Have you thought about the cost of that decision over and over again throughout your life?

*There was a time in my life when I was raising my kids alone and money was so tight that I even went without meals on occasions so my kids would be able to eat.*

*Was it worth it to me? You bet.*

**Nothing worthwhile comes without sacrifice and that includes following Jesus as well.** Martin Luther said, *“A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.”*

Will we at times falter in our quest with Christ? Yes.

Will our decision to make Jesus number one in our lives fall short at times? You bet.

I could certainly share times with you of when my own commitment to serve Christ wholeheartedly suffered failure at times. The tragedy is not that we occasionally fail in making Jesus our priority; the tragedy is not getting back on our feet after such a failure with an even deeper zest for allegiance and service to the Lord.

Now if what I am saying makes you feel guilty, then I have missed the mark. I do not want you to feel guilty. Jesus doesn't want you to follow him out of guilt. If you are not doing it for the right reasons by no means do it out of guilt. In fact that is kind of the point of this Luke passage. Jesus wants you to take up your cross and follow him after you have looked at what it will cost you to do that and have decided to willingly follow him, leaving your excuses behind and whole-heartedly, 100% giving your all to Jesus.

What excuse do you need to give up to God today?

What is holding you back from giving God your all?

What takes first place far too often in your life and you need to turn over to God?

What seems like too big a cost to pay for the joy of being a follower of Jesus Christ?

As you look at that excuse right now through the eyes of Jesus, does it seem like you are saying, like my Aunt did, you need to take out the trash first? Maybe that isn't such a dumb excuse after all. What “trash” do you and I need to empty from our lives so that Jesus can have more of our life, so that Jesus can be our first priority?

I want to give you the opportunity to do that right now.

Pull out your sermon notes:

I want to give each of you a couple of minutes right now to jot down a word or two that best expresses what excuse you need to let go of in order to COME AND FOLLOW Jesus without reservation, hesitation, vacillation, indecision or fluctuation right now, today.

I want to assure you that with the help of the Holy Spirit in you, the Word of God to guide you and a determined fixing of your eyes on Jesus, it is possible for us to let go of these excuses....even for me.

As we stand to sing I want to invite you to come and drop that excuse in the box up here. You will notice that the box is wrapped in such a way as to never be opened. No one will ever see what you are giving up to God, except God and you. This is just an outward symbol of what you and Christ have agreed upon inwardly – but sometimes its important for us to make the gesture so that we know we meant it. Christ is inviting each one of you today to COME AND FOLLOW him with your whole heart.