

The Third Sunday after Pentecost
June 29-30, 2019
Luke 9:51-62

“I Will Follow You”

We all follow something in life, don't we? Something that will give us identity, purpose, and meaning. Maybe it's our career, or our family, or a sports team, or a particular interest or pursuit. A person comes up to Jesus in today's Gospel lesson and says to him, **“I will follow you wherever you go”** (Luke 9:56). Hmm... that is a big statement. Did the individual who said it really know what he was saying? What he would be signing up for? What he would be getting himself into? Within Judaism at this time, there were many rabbis, teachers, each of whom attracted a following of people who spent time with them, observed their manner of life, and sought to follow their example. It was protocol that the student, or disciple, chose his rabbi, or teacher, which is exactly what is taking place here. But that's not what Jesus did. Jesus flipped this practice upside-down and instead of the student choosing his teacher, Jesus, the Master Teacher, chose his students, his disciples. We see examples of both here in the Gospel lesson for today: the student seeking his teacher, as well as the teacher seeking his student. We, too, are called to follow Jesus. Based on the Gospel lesson for today, today's message is entitled **“I Will Follow You.”** May the Lord's rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus' sake.

We could actually add one more word to that sermon title for today: **“I Will Follow You *But...*”** Because that's usually what it comes down to, doesn't it? Jesus cautions would-be followers to weigh carefully what following him will entail: **“Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”** (Luke 9:58). These people in the Gospel lesson were called and wanted to follow Jesus, but they imposed conditions and qualifications: **“Lord, let me first go and bury my father”** (Luke 9:59), and **“I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home”** (Luke 9:61). Now these sound like reasonable accommodations to us, right? If a person's father has died, shouldn't he do the right thing and give his father a decent burial? And wouldn't it be the proper thing to say farewell to the folks at home before starting out on this new chapter in life? Jesus' response to these would-be disciples seems harsh to us: **“Leave the dead to bury their own dead... No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”** (Luke 9:60a, 62). By comparison, when Jesus called Simon Peter, James, and John we read: **“And when they brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him”** (Luke 5:11). And when Jesus called Levi, or Matthew, sitting at his tax booth, we read: **“And leaving everything, he rose and followed him”** (Luke 5:28). No mention here about conditions or qualifications. Nothing about **“I will follow you, *but...*”** They left everything to follow Jesus. That is what we do not see in the response of those who are called to follow Jesus in today's Gospel lesson. Jesus clearly tells us: **“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you”** (Matthew 6:33). We are also skilled in making excuses about why we cannot follow Jesus: now is not a good time; I'm not ready to make that commitment; I'm too busy right now; I have to take care of this or that. Blah, blah, blah. Jesus isn't looking for excuses; he is looking for disciples. Jesus has called us not only to believe in him, but to follow him as well. It is this clear-eyed vision and whole-hearted response that Jesus is looking for.

The truth of the matter is that none of us measures up with such a clear-eyed vision and whole-hearted response in following Jesus. Peter himself failed to measure up. When the going got tough, Peter denied ever knowing Jesus three times. And I imagine all of those first disciples were no better – and no worse – than Peter. They were, like all of us, flawed and imperfect people, prone to selfishness and sin. Their hope, and our hope as well, is not in our following Jesus, but in Jesus' following the way of the cross where he paid the price for all of our flaws and imperfections; all of our selfishness and sin. Because of what Jesus has done for us by shedding his blood and giving his life for us and for our salvation, our

following is not about keeping score with God. It's not about racking up brownie points to prove how good we are. It is about being set free to give ourselves in joyful response to Jesus for all that he has done for us. It is about loving and serving others as Jesus has loved and served us. All of this will still be imperfect, of course, because even when we are redeemed through the blood of Jesus, sin still clings closely to us (Hebrews 12:1). But God isn't finished with us yet. By the grace of God we press on, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus. As Paul tells us in today's Epistle lesson: **"Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'"** (Galatians 5:13b-14). By the grace of God at work in our lives, those fruits of the Spirit that Paul writes about will begin to be seen: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Following Jesus does not mean that we will have a sweet and easy life before passing to a sweet reward, as Elijah knew too well from today's Old Testament lesson (1 Kings 19:9b-21). If anything, following Jesus means that we will, like Jesus, encounter challenges, difficulties, and opposition. I want to share with you a story from fellow believers in Africa who know what this means first-hand. "Northern Nigeria is a dangerous place for Christians—especially for those who have left Islam to follow Christ. But BarnabasAid [an aid agency for the persecuted church] says God intervened in power to save 72 converts and their children from Boko Haram militants. According to BarnabasAid, these Believers excel in courageous faith, they have met Christ face-to-face and heard Him speak, they have experienced His miraculous deliverance. They cannot build themselves up by daily study of His Word—because they cannot read. Or they do not have a New Testament. Their story begins with a group of 500 Nigerian Christian converts from Islam and their children. It is not normal for this tribe to gather in such large numbers, but all of them had already been attacked by Boko Haram Islamist militants and they hoped that a larger group would give them a measure of security. Boko Haram were not deterred. They attacked the group and captured 76, taking them back to their camp. At the Boko Haram camp, the Christians were tortured, and their four male leaders were told they must deny Christ and return to Islam or they would be shot. The four refused and were duly shot dead, in full view of the rest of the group. A week later the four widows of the dead men were told they must renounce their Christian faith or their children would be shot. They were given time to think over this dreadful choice. As they agonized together that evening, their excited children came running in, telling their mothers that Jesus had appeared to them and told them all would be well. Jesus then appeared to the whole group of 72, and told them not to fear for He would protect them. He said they should not renounce Him but should stay strong, and that He was the Way, the Truth and the Life. The next day, the four mothers gave their decision to the militants—they would not deny Christ. The militants prepared to shoot the children, who were already lined up against a wall. The youngest was a little girl of four. Suddenly the militants began screaming and clawing at their own heads. Shouting 'Snakes!' they fled the scene, and some of them dropped dead. One of the Christian men reached for the gun of a dead militant but the four-year-old put her hand on his arm to stop him. 'You don't need to do that,' she said, 'Can't you see the men in white fighting for us?'" (https://www.breakingchristiannews.com/articles/display_art.html?ID=28206&fbclid=IwAR3OYMZqv4-Xts4RIGpAaRu9JJvaj_aXhtOtxBSDySt6NAcwfGoivMqCV8U).

Jesus is here among us now as he was among his children in Nigeria. Although we may not see him as his children in Nigeria did, He is here – present in his holy Word, in the cleansing waters of Holy Baptism, and under bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. Through these means of grace, Jesus comes to us to strengthen and sustain us in following him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let us rejoice in him who calls us by name that we may rise up without fear or hesitation and follow him. Amen.