

One of the many aspects that I love about our bible studies is that many times in the study, the church members who are attending ask me questions that I do not know the answer for and I need to go digging deeper. Or there is something in the text that grabbed their attention that did not grab mine and it propels me to go and explore a different direction. One that I did not plan on doing.

This happened once again on Tuesday, but in an unexpected way. A question that was on the table was, “is this the first time that they had encountered Jesus?”

I am not sure about you, but I still have this urge to get to what I believe is the meat of the text. This is not only when I am reading the bible but when I am reading stories. In my mind, I think that I can skip this part to get to this part.

Well, in my readings of this text, I may have skipped over two important pieces of information that may alter completely how I read and understand the text. For you see, I have always wanted to skip ahead to the three questions and the responses that Jesus gave.

Well, before I jump into the text and share with you what I have previously missed, let me do some stage-setting for you.

Right before our reading today, Jesus and the disciples were together. The disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest. During the argument, Jesus began to realize how much this meant to them. Thus, he brought a child into their midst and said the following: “You become great by accepting, not asserting. Your spirit, not your size, makes the difference.”

Now, you can’t make this stuff up. So, following this touching and profound comment from Jesus, John looks at Jesus and says, “Master, we saw a man using your name to expel demons and we stopped him because he wasn’t of our group.” Jesus responds with the following, “Don’t stop him. If he’s not an enemy, he’s an ally.”

With the backstory in place, we now enter into the text for today and it starts off with verse fifty-one and verse fifty-one is an explicitly important moment structurally in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus is now setting his face onto Jerusalem. The journey begins.

In our conversation, the question was, is this the first encounter with Jesus. The quick answer is yes. However, there is something in the text that I missed and I want to share it with you because maybe, like I, you missed it too.

In verses fifty-two and fifty-three, we read the following:

He sent messengers on ahead. They came to a Samaritan village to make hospitality arrangements for Jesus. But when the Samaritans learned that his destination was Jerusalem, they refused hospitality.

So, why did the Samaritans refuse hospitality because he was headed to Jerusalem. It does not seem to make much sense. For us, who live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and may not have a great knowledge of history, it seems to be insignificant. Yet, these few words are extremely telling.

There had been a long history of dispute between the Samaritans and the Jews. Much of the dispute was over worship sites. There was a strong belief that Jerusalem was the only proper place for Jewish worship. Worship could not happen anywhere else. Well, the Samaritans worshipped at Mount Gerizim.

In Samaritan tradition, it is the oldest and most central mountain in the world, towering above the Great Flood and providing the first land for Noah's disembarkation. Approximately 150 years prior to Jesus and the disciples arriving, their sanctuary was completely destroyed by Jewish forces under the orders of the Hasmonean leader John Hyrcanus. The Samaritans considered their temple to be their most holy spot.

Thus, tensions were high and they were not ready to show hospitality. Mt. Gerizim had become the main point of divergence between the Samaritans and the Jews.

So, now Jesus has reunited with his disciples and James and John were not happy. Remember, when I set the story, John had just shared with Jesus that he had stopped some healings and Jesus told him, if they are not an enemy, they are an ally. John's anger may have hit a tipping point. He wants to send fire down from heaven and consume them up on the spot.

In our study on Tuesday, we talked about how hurtful it feels to be rejected. Rejection can just make you feel terrible. Then there was some conversation that maybe James and John were channeling some Old Testament vibes. Elijah called down lightning that killed a captain and fifty men, twice.

I think James and John were caught off guard. They were really expecting hospitality to be shown. They decided to take the vengeance approach where Jesus decided to take the approach of restoration. Jesus shows no desire, what so ever, for judgment to come upon the Samaritans. Instead of giving them permission to rain down the fire, he rebukes them for their desire of vengeance. Jesus mission is rather simple, proclaim the good news. The ministry of Jesus is truly about restoration.

In previous sermons, I have talked about Jesus and the disciples being on the move. That is the decision for Jesus. He decides that he is not going to bring judgment. He also decides that the ground that he is standing on is not fertile ministry ground; so, it is time to move on to another village.

This brings me to the second point that I have missed when I engaged in this text. I am not sure how, but I have missed a key ingredient to the three conversations that Jesus had on being committed to him.

In our bible study, we shared that following Jesus can be tough. We talked about how we did not perceive the request to be out of bounds. We shared personal stories that what they were requesting was not only reasonable but they were possibly absolutely necessary.

As I dug deeper, I was looking at verses fifty six and fifty seven and I notice that indeed they left for another village and they were on the road when the conversation was occurring. Thus they were following and traveling with Jesus. I was then reading some work from Professor Rogness. He was a professor at Luther for 22+ years and he states that this discussion is not with newbies. The language makes it clear that these "someone's" are indeed current followers and not potential followers. Jesus in this conversation is using conversation style of hyperboles and exaggeration to make his point. The point that Jesus is making is that you must be willing to let go of your past and you must move into uncharted waters.

When I read that, I was immediately taken back to another conversation that we had in our text study on Tuesday. A question that was asked that we did not touch was about verse 62 and I shared that maybe my studies will lead me there and here it is.

In verse sixty-two we read:

“No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Jesus does not want us to look back. He wants us to move forward and as most farmers, from my experience, will tell you, if you are plowing a field; you have to watch carefully what is in front of you. If you do not keep your eyes ahead and you are looking behind yourself, there is no way that you will be able to keep your furrows straight.

In a sense, it is wild. If we jump ahead into the story, we will see that the disciples did not follow this advice. Following Jesus death and resurrection and before Pentecost; this is what the disciples did. They looked back and resumed their previous occupations.

Do we, as Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, follow that advice?

I think that we tend to look backwards and not forwards and because of that, our paths, our goals and our future are not straight and the way that God would hope for us to go.

As I stood back and looked at the text in its entirety I think that the conversation that Jesus had with the followers; whether they be current or potential and then the last verse on having our hand on the plow and looking for can really challenge us.

Discipleship means living in ways we might not otherwise live.

Lutherans, in my opinion, are scared to talk about discipleship. When we take a look at discipleship, we see that being a Christian and a disciple of Jesus gives us a new identity. The new identity was highlighted last week in our Romans text. We have a citizenship in heaven and because of that, our lives are not just measured by eternal things.

As I wrap the sermon up, Philip Scharper talks about the disciple's journey with Jesus as them being pilgrims. He then expands it to say that they were actually nomads.

I know that I have seen the language still used today. It has become a church metaphor. The people of God are on a pilgrimage. We lean into during funerals. So, what is the difference between pilgrims and nomads. Here is a definition that I appreciate:

Pilgrims know where the journey is headed.

Nomads are called to go by uncertain paths to a place that shall be made holy at some indefinite time by something God shall say or do.

So much has changes over the last 20+ years in the life of churches in the United States and it has changed exponentially in the last twenty-five months. With all the changes, I truly believe that we are nomads.

Friends, we may be called to travel uncertain paths, but may we be courageous enough to stay on the journey. May we not be afraid to live into our baptismal promise of proclaiming the Good News in word and deed, no matter where we go. As we go on this new and wild journey, may we remember that Jesus and his disciples were rejected on their journey. The rejection may come from members of your own group or the rejection may come from another group. But, hold onto this final truth that I will share with you from Stephen Boyd:

Jesus insists that the risk is necessary for the work of the kingdom.