

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

June 29, 2025 (Proper 8, Year C)
Luke 9:51-62

I know I'm preaching to the choir here, because you ARE in worship, but I once read this in a church newsletter. It reads:

To make it possible for everyone to attend church next Sunday, we are going to have a special "No Excuse Sunday." Cots will be placed in the foyer for those who say, "Sunday is my only day to sleep in." There will be a special section with lounge chairs for those who feel that pews are too hard. Eye drops will be available for those with tired eyes from watching TV late Saturday night. We will have steel helmets for those who say, "The roof would cave in if I ever came to church." Blankets will be furnished for those who think the church is too cold and fans for those who say it's too hot. Scorecards will be available for those who wish to list the hypocrites present. Relatives and friends will be in attendance for those who like to VISIT on Sundays. We will distribute "Stamp Out Stewardship" buttons for those who feel that the church is always asking for money. One section will be devoted to trees and grass for those who like to seek God in nature. Doctors and nurses will be in attendance for those who plan to be SICK on Sunday. The sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who never have seen the church WITHOUT them. We will provide hearing aids for those who can't hear the preacher and cotton for those who say he preaches too loudly. IT'S NO EXCUSE SUNDAY! SEE YOU IN CHURCH.

It's FUNNY, but that's what Jesus actually SOUNDS like in our Gospel today. He's not taking ANY excuses.

We have here three people who are asked to make a choice, and it seems they're trying REALLY HARD to FOLLOW Jesus. But they ALSO seem to have EXCUSES.

The thing is—their excuses are actually pretty GOOD. The first simply says that he'll follow Jesus anywhere. Now it doesn't say it directly, but he also has an excuse – it's implied, because Jesus TELLS him he doesn't KNOW what he'll be giving up. Jesus was blunt with him. One translation puts his response like this: "Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know" (the message). That's Jesus saying that HE doesn't HAVE a home, that he doesn't have all the COMFORTS, like this man does, and he expects HIM to give them up too.

The second excuse seems reasonable enough: "I've gotta bury my Dad." You'd think that Jesus would know that burying one's parents is an important RESPONSIBILITY in a person's life. In fact, it's part of the COMMANDMENT to HONOR your father and your mother. But he doesn't SAY THAT; he says, "Let the DEAD bury their OWN dead."

And the third person who wants to follow Jesus, all HE wants to do is to say GOODBYE to his FAMILY first. Seems acceptable. You'd think that Jesus would be a nice guy and say something like, "Okay then, but be quick about it, because we have a lot to do." After all, that's what Elijah did for Elisha in our FIRST reading. But Jesus doesn't SAY THAT. Instead, he says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks BACK is FIT for the kingdom of God."

Does it seem to you that Jesus is being a little grouchy here? It's out of character for him. He's unreasonable. He's harsh. He doesn't allow ANY wiggle room!

Well there's a REASON for that. Don't pass over the BEGINNING of our passage too quickly. It says, "When the days drew near...he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus knew his time was short, his time was now, so "he gathered up (all) his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem" (the message). This was a turning point for Jesus. Everything he says and does from

here on has a certain URGENCY to it, because this is a man who knows he's about to die. He's determined, he's decided, he's just "SET HIS FACE." And then he meets three people who are "turning their heads." It's really NO WONDER Jesus was grumpy with these would-be disciples – their TIMING COULDN'T have been WORSE.

At a church women's conference, a layperson with the responsibility of family programming shared this problem. She said she gets really upset when people say that the church is very important to them, yet immediately say that they can't help with a specific program or emphasis because they have something ELSE to do. She gave some examples, people saying, "I really think that the children are a top priority for the church, BUT I can't teach Sunday School because that's the morning that my children sleep in, since they've been up late the night before." Or, "I think that family outings or fellowship time is important, BUT I can't come to the picnic because my son has baseball practice that day." She gave several other examples, all of which are excuses every church worker has heard. Finally she said, "I wish we could kick all the "buts" out of the church!"

She went on to explain that grammatically, anytime a sentence CONTAINS the word "but," it entirely NEGATES what was said before it. If you say, "This is important, BUT..." then it's NOT important to you.

In some ways these would-be followers of Jesus want to put CONDITIONS on their following. They say, "Jesus, I'll follow you anywhere, BUT FIRST...."

And that's just IT – the things you put FIRST are the things that are MOST IMPORTANT to you.

And Jesus is calling us to CHOOSE. What are we going to put FIRST?

This is hard for us. We are GOOD at making excuses. I know a pastor who has no problem confronting his flock about their choices. When they say, "Pastor, I just don't HAVE any money to give to the church," their pastor says, "You know, I couldn't help but notice that new 4 wheeler in your yard. And the new truck. And the boat. Don't TELL me you don't have any money." I could NEVER be that bold, but it works for him.

Here's the point, the things you put FIRST are the things that are MOST IMPORTANT to you.

Let's be honest. Our desire for soft pillows and comfortable beds, and for keeping family and social obligations, will usually be HIGHER PRIORITIES than following JESUS. We might be willing to give up some EVILS in our lives, but to give up all these GOOD things – to make THEM a LOWER priority than Jesus? Well, that's RADICAL discipleship.

When I served a church in the Cities, there was a young man named Tian Li. He was from China. Well, actually, he FLED China, because he's a Christian and it's ILLEGAL to practice the Christian faith in CHINA. He was persecuted for his faith. So Tian left his home and family, crossed mountains and an ocean, and sought asylum here in the United States, because this is a CHRISTIAN country. This young man couldn't speak English and didn't UNDERSTAND a WORD I said, but he WALKED to church EVERY Sunday and WORSHIPPED with us, because he wanted to PRACTICE his faith. He even started ushering. He was just happy to WORSHIP, no matter WHERE, no matter what time, no matter the language. He just wanted to WORSHIP.

Jesus is calling us to DISCIPLESHIP. This is about COMMITMENT.

So, what does all this MEAN for us? Does it mean that God expects us all to live like monks and nuns? Does it mean that we're DAMNED TO HELL if we have excuses? Does it mean that burying our parents and saying goodbye to our families isn't IMPORTANT?

NO, of COURSE not. Jesus EXAGGERATED to make his point, just like when he said to gouge out your eye or cut off your hand. He EXAGGERATED to CONFRONT those people, because he wanted to SHOW that, no matter how matter how IMPORTANT something is in our lives, following HIM is MORE important. God's will and God's kingdom are ABOVE EVERYTHING else. It's above our COMFORT, and it's above our need for CONTROL. It's above even our FAMILY.

I KNOW a little something about that. You may have noticed that there haven't been any of MY CLOSEST family at our services here. It's because they won't COME to MY church anymore. My CHURCH, the ELCA, decided to ACCEPT our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, and marry them,

and even ORDAIN them. Most of my family have never stepped FOOT in my church ever since. That HURTS, and I have to LIVE with that, BUT (and I use that word INTENTIONALLY here) this is the RIGHT thing to do. I stand for CHRIST, for HIS LOVE FOR ALL people, with NO EXCEPTIONS, REGARDLESS of what that COSTS me PERSONALLY.

We could SETTLE for LESS. We MIGHT say, "Give us a break Jesus. We're in CHURCH, aren't we?" But as Billy Graham once said, as only HE could, "Being in church no more makes you a Christian than being in your GARAGE makes you a CAR." Martin Luther said, "A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is WORTH nothing."

So Jesus CONFRONTS us. He confronts our excuses, because he cares ENOUGH for us to tell us the TRUTH. We have a God that expects the BEST out of us – NO excuses allowed. When we have a choice between, on the ONE hand doing what we WANT to do, or even a seemingly GOOD thing that we think we NEED to do, and on the OTHER hand, following JESUS, Jesus wants us to choose HIM.

He wants us to choose him, like HE CHOSE US. You see, when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem," at THAT MOMENT, he said "no" to all the OTHER possibilities for his life, GOOD possibilities. He said "no" to settling down with a wife and having children. He said "no" to honing his skills as a carpenter and sharing his craft with others. He said "no" to experiencing his first gray hair, the birth of his first grandchild, or the respect he'd GET someday as an ELDER of the village of Nazareth. He said "no" to EVERYTHING his life COULD have been, to all those GOOD things.

And he said "yes" to something he valued MORE; he said "yes" to US. He said "yes" to death on a cross—to SAVE us. He CHOSE to give his life for us, hoping that WE would give OUR life to HIM.

Jesus is saying to each of YOU, "Being my disciple means saying "yes" to some things and "no" to others. You CAN'T say "yes" to EVERYTHING: You have to CHOOSE. You have to DECIDE what is MORE IMPORTANT.

It's your choice. What comes FIRST? Amen.