

Perils on the Path?

We've come back to this passage from Luke again today, because last week we really only dipped our toes into all that there is to learn from these four brief episodes at the beginning of Luke's Travel Narrative. To recap a little, in the middle section of the gospel—beginning at chapter 9 verse 51 and continuing all the way through chapter 19 verse 27, Luke follows Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem. I made a case last week that we probably shouldn't think of this a literal travelogue—since it would have only taken Jesus a few days to make that short trip. It's really a roadmap for a different sort of journey--the long and winding spiritual journey we embark on when we take up our own crosses to follow Jesus. As I described it—following Jesus isn't a short-term project, it's a life-long adventure.

Not long before Jesus begins this journey, he says, in chapter 9, verse 23, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." Notice that in Luke's version of this saying Jesus says "daily." Following Jesus isn't a three-day road trip; it's a daily choice to follow wherever he leads, no matter where that path may take us.

When I've purchased new tires for my car, I've noticed that they usually come with something called "road hazard insurance." This adds a little to the cost of the tires, but it's considered a good investment because we all know that

driving down the road has its perils—there are potholes and broken glass or those dangerous treads that come flying off truck tires on the interstate. Following Jesus on the journey of discipleship has perils, too—spiritual perils that can complicate our journey or cause us to wander off the road and lose our way. In the rest of chapter 9, Luke has collected together four incidents that point out some of the perils along our path.

In the first incident Jesus sends some messengers on ahead into the region of the Samaritans to make arrangements for what we would call bed and breakfast. Things don't go well—but the curious thing is that this shouldn't have been a surprise to anyone, beginning with Jesus himself. Luke says as much in verse 53, where he writes, “they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” In fact, Jews going to Jerusalem usually didn't go through Samaria—they took a more roundabout path for precisely this reason. They knew they weren't likely to be welcomed there. So what's going on here?

I think we can make a good case that Jesus leads the disciples this way to teach them something—to expose to them one of the perils on the path for those who choose to follow him. And that peril is self-righteousness.

When the disciples see Jesus being given the cold shoulder, they want Jesus to go all Elijah on these apostate half-breed pseudo-Jews and call down fire to destroy them. And notice that it's not just anyone who demands this, but two of Jesus' star pupils. James and John. They have been personally chosen by Jesus, they are playing on the right team, they have set out on the hard path of

following him, and as far as they are concerned anyone who has a problem with that can literally go to hell.

We might say that we would never be like that—but our attitudes may just not be that extreme. Self-righteousness and a strong sense of mission have a way of going hand in hand. I spoke last week —by way of an illustration—about my numerous diet and exercise projects over many years. I've found since I began this seesaw struggle in my early thirties, that my doctors have taken something between a hands-off to a mildly encouraging approach to the subject of losing weight. They might say something like, "It would be good for your cholesterol level or your blood sugar if you lost a few pounds."

But once, I had an appointment with a new doctor who in the course of our conversation told me that he had high cholesterol, too, and had just taken off twenty or twenty-five pounds or something like that. And apparently he had decided that it was his mission to put the fear of God into all his patients. His harangue mostly just made me mad, but at least it got me started on another diet and exercise project. It eventually petered out, of course.

If we think of ourselves as people who take following Jesus seriously, we face the peril of self-righteousness and judging people who aren't doing it right—in other words, who aren't doing it like us. One of the ways this manifests itself in what we could call the "I'm doing all the work around here syndrome." But when those feelings arise, we need to stop and consider that our judging may be based on a lack of information – there are many other ways of serving the Lord than the

ones you have been called to, or that you can actually see. Or, you may actually be right. But even though that Samaritan village was inhospitable, Jesus' rebuked James and John anyhow. Because self-righteousness will trip us up every time on the path of the cross.

In the second incident Jesus encounters another enthusiastic follower. This one tells Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." We could call this the peril of false confidence – more specifically, it's the immature over-confidence that comes from not really knowing what we're promising.

In itself, making promises to the Lord isn't necessarily a bad thing. One of the milestones in my early years as a Christian was making pretty much the same promise as the person in the story. It happened in Assembly Hall at the University of Illinois, on the closing night of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's world mission conference, Urbana '76. Billy Graham has just preached and had issued the challenge—and I joined thousands of others who stood and made that pledge. It has been a touchstone in my life when decisions about ministry and moving myself and my family around the country have come along.

But Jesus is concerned here that this person isn't really aware of what he's promising. Following him comes with the promise of hardships along the road. As he puts it, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He's not talking here about the hardships that are common to human experience, but about hardships that come because we choose to follow him. If we say we will follow him "wherever," that means going

to the places where he goes. And although Jesus did occasionally enjoy a nice dinner in the home of a Pharisee, he was more likely to be found in the homes of disreputable people like tax collectors, or touching the untouchables. Following Jesus may cost the person who takes a moral stand in his name their job and home, or it may land the person who stands with Jesus beside the oppressed in jail. When you say “wherever” do mean it?

The third incident begins with an invitation to a person Jesus meets a simple “Follow me.” But it immediately becomes complicated for this man who asks for leave to go home first and bury his father. As with all his sayings in this section, Jesus' answer is terse, “Let the dead bury their own dead ...” The fourth incident is similar, and leads to another hard saying, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

I'm going to call this the peril of half-heartedness. That may sound harsh itself, but there are a couple of things to consider before we think Jesus is being unreasonable. Because there are things that people consider so important that they will miss a family funeral or slight their loved ones in other ways. Some of these things are just matters of personal ambition—the degree to which people will sacrifice relationships in the pursuit of fame and fortune can be astounding. Others, though, have done it from unselfish motivations—people who miss school programs or deaths or births because their service to others takes them far away from home.

This may be a bit of an aside, but many of those undocumented migrants we hear so much about, often in disparaging terms, are actually in the second category. They come to the US, leaving loved ones behind, not to sponge off our social services, but to work as hard as they possibly can—very often doing jobs that Americans aren't willing to do—so they can send money back to their struggling families at home. We've been hearing about our government's plans to deport 200,000 people from El Salvador who were admitted to the US after earthquakes devastated their homeland in 2001. A news story revealed that, seventeen years later, 80 to 85 percent of those migrants still send money back to El Salvador—an average of \$4,300 each, for a total of more than \$600 million a year. It's money that saves many families from starvation, and supports the growth of that impoverished nation's economy. There are things that people will make such sacrifices for.

The other thing we need to remember about Jesus' words is their context. He is saying these things at a critical moment in his journey. For Jesus this was a journey literally to the cross. He had set his face toward the crossroads of human history, and joining him at that moment of history was not for the half-hearted.

Most of the time, most Christians will not be called to such extreme forms of sacrifice. We will have places to rest our heads and our faith will be lived out surrounded by families and friends.

However, I've been haunted for years by an expression I came across in book I read over twenty years ago called *The Culture of Disbelief*, written by

Stephen Carter. He says that much of the blame for the decline of Christianity in America is because too many American Christians treat following Jesus like a “hobby.” And in fact, it is very common these days to find books and resources about spirituality aimed at helping people fit spiritual practices into their busy lives—rather than calling us to re-order our daily routines around our spiritual disciplines. And many participate in the life of a Christian community at times and places and in ways that work in around not just family and work demands, but also around their other “hobbies.”

I remember once having a conversation with a dear friend and parishioner. I told him about something I had been pondering—the idea of setting aside a morning every week to turn off the phone and focus completely on prayer and Scripture and reading. In the end it was probably just another idea for a “project” that I never would have stuck with—although I did manage to spend every Monday out of the office for several years while I worked on my doctorate. And my friend was actually supportive, but then he said something like this, “That’s an interesting idea. The pastor at our last church used to take a morning off a week to play tennis.” What he communicated—intentionally or not—was that using a morning a week to intentionally seek God was just another hobby.

Imagine the power that could be unleashed if America’s Christians reallocated even a half or a quarter of the time and resources we spend on entertaining ourselves to going to places where Jesus went—including where he went we he took a day off.

In our old stomping grounds in Northern New York, there was a stretch of US Route 9 that was vulnerable to a phenomenon called frost heaves. In the winter, the freezing and thawing of the ground beneath the road was so severe that it would first create a giant dangerous bump in the road, and then it would collapse and leave a big –and equally dangerous – ditch. It was on flat and straight section of the road where people routinely exceeded the speed limit. It wasn't for signs the highway department posted, there could have been some very serious accidents.

As Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem, Luke includes these four incidents as road hazard signs to warn us of some of the perils on the path. Self-righteousness, false-confidence, half-heartedness—these are some of the big things that can block us from even getting a good start on the journey. And being able to recognize them for what they are can go a long way in helping keep us from getting stuck or stranded along the way.

Jesus calls us to take up our crosses anew every day and follow him. It's a challenging path—complete with perils—but it is the path that leads to life.

Amen.

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January 21, 2018*