

“What’s Holding You Back?”

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First Presbyterian Church
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 16

New Testament Lesson: Luke 9:57-62

Most of you know that my wife, Yuri, teaches flute. One of the biggest challenges she has is getting her students to practice. “With some students,” said Yuri, “I think that somehow they’re not engaged. They don’t see the benefit of sitting down and doing it. They don’t see the horizon of what’s possible.”

For instance, Yuri has been encouraging her middle-school student to learn the whole range of notes available on the flute. But every week, the student has to look at the fingering chart. “And it’s only 5 more notes to learn the top end of the range!” said Yuri. This particular student has been playing flute for over three years.

Meanwhile, another student whose been playing for only one year has already learned everything – the whole range of notes. “I never told him it was hard,” said Yuri.

What’s the difference between these two students, I wonder. The way Yuri sees it, the younger student is self-motivated. “It has to be a goal of your own” says Yuri. It could be my goal, but it has to be the student’s goal even more. The student needs to see the benefits of working at a discipline that is going to move him or her ahead.” And there-in lies the focus of her teaching “My goal as a teacher,” says Yuri, “is to engage a student in whatever way he or she will grab onto it, and move forward.”

Looking at Our New Testament lesson for today, I think that was Jesus’ goal, also, to engage us in a way that has us grab onto the freedom and promise of the Gospel and move forward with it. And that begs the question what is holding us back, to the extent that things are not as God intended.

Jesus calls out to us three times in today’s reading. The first call is to Walk Along with him, the second to Walk Away from what’s holding us back, and the third to Walk On toward the kingdom of God, toward a world changed and transformed because of Jesus’ presence among us.

Let’s look at each of these three calls in turn, the call to Walk Along, Walk Away, and Walk On, with Jesus. Luke tells us that as Jesus was going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go,” and Jesus responds, saying, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

This is Jesus’ call to walk alongside him. People who follow Jesus are often called to do so at the risk of their physical comfort, rest, and security.

I mean, picture yourself all excited about this new and amazing prophet and healer coming to town. You run up and say, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And he says to you, where I’m going, where you are called to go, there is no guarantee of a comfy, cozy place to lay your head. You may have to sleep on the floor of Westminster Hall for an all-night youth lock in. You may have to eat chicken nuggets at Logos that are just barely warmed (not really, the food’s always quite good, considering.)

You may have to drive Meals on Wheels during hot summer days or wake up at 6:00 a.m. on a Saturday for Project Shine, or any number of ministry opportunities that have nothing to do with our comfort and security and everything to do with someone else’s need.

That’s what it is to answer Jesus’ call to Walk Along beside him as he serves the least of these in our world today. Walk Along, and Walk Away. Jesus sees another wide-eyed, would-be follower along the road and says to him, “Follow me.” But he says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” And Jesus says to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

This second person isn’t necessarily concerned with his own physical comfort and security. No, what gets in the way here are the perfectly understandable and upstanding obligations that family and society put upon us, in this case, attending the burial of ones family members.

Now we don’t have any details about this situation. Bible commentators note that it could be the father wasn’t even dead yet, or even sick. It could be that this person is wanting to stay close to home until all affairs are in order, everything tied up nice and neat.

Has that ever been the case for you – everything tied up nice and neat, nothing to hold you back? No, of course not; me neither. To be a follower of Jesus means having loose ends in life. It means being willing to Walk Away from things in order to go somewhere new with Jesus.

There are plenty of people in this church and throughout this presbytery who leave loose ends till later in order to do what they feel called to do. In other words, “bad timing” is not an excuse that we can rely on, at least not all the time. It’s OK once in awhile, but if it is never the right time for you, then you’re missing out, you’re missing out on the chance to follow Jesus in ministry.

Listen to the following tongue-in-cheek attempts to put an end to the “bad timing” excuse when it comes to not following Jesus, to church:¹

- Cots will be placed in the (Parlour) for those who say, “Sunday is my only day to sleep in.”
- (Eye drops) will be available for those who have red eyes from (staying up to watch the Royals) on Saturday night.

¹ Pulpit Digest, July-August 1976, 64.

- We will have steel helmets for those who say, “The roof will cave in if I ever come to Sunday school and church.”
- Blankets ... for those who say, “The church is too cold,” and fans for those who think it is too hot.
- We will have hearing aids for those who say, “The pastor speaks too softly,” and cotton for those who say the pastor preaches too loudly.
- Score cards will be available for those who wish to list all of the hypocrites present. ...
- And finally, the sanctuary will be decorated with both Christmas poinsettias and Easter lilies for those who have never seen the church without them.

Actually, the lesson here is, if you're waiting for the planets to align just right before saying “yes” to Jesus, you're going to be waiting a long time, and missing a lot of blessings, for both yourself and for others.

This is in contrast to those who are bold enough in their faith to leave a few loose ends, risk being a little uncomfortable for the sake of Jesus. For those who step out in faith, God always finds a way to make things work out.

And actually, when we trust in God's love and grace above all else, we become better equipped to deal with life. Our faith grows and in that, we become more than we know ourselves to be.

And then there is the call of Jesus for us to Walk On, to leave behind our attachment to “what was” in order to embrace what could and will be! This call comes when another bystander says to Jesus, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus says to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Here, Jesus uses an agricultural reference, reminding us that the kingdom of God is about preparing for the harvest. Preparing for the harvest means sharing the Gospel in a way that has others also wanting to follow and serve the Lord. And that is the hardest thing to do in today's society.

It used to be that going to church was a given – it's what people did. Now, churches face the challenge of discovering new ways of drawing people into relationship with Jesus. It's all about relationships. Notice that this third person wants to go back and say farewell to those at his home before Walking On into a new and exciting future with Jesus. What about taking those people with him!?! Do we even invite people to Walk On beside us as we follow Jesus?

I'm afraid that too often, we don't. We get discouraged in our call to share the faith. But the truth is, Walking On means following Jesus whether others want to follow or not – and our hope is they will. We never lose hope, we never stop inviting people into relationship with Jesus, no matter how hard it is.

None of these ways of following Jesus is easy. It's not easy to Walk Along beside Jesus when that means risking our own comfort and security. It's not easy to Walk Away from loose ends in order to do the work of the Lord. It's not easy to

Walk On with Jesus AND to bring others along with us, if they'll follow, and if not, to walk on and invite, still, others.

It's not easy! But whether our friends and loved ones follow along, whether loose ends have to wait, whether our comfort and security is at risk, our challenge – and our opportunity – is to trust in God and follow Jesus.

So the question for each of us is, "What's Holding YOU Back?" – What's holding me back in those moments when Jesus calls out to us and says "follow me," and I/we say, "yes, but..." Yes, Jesus, but I've got a loose end to attend to first. Yes, Jesus, but that might not be real comfortable for me. Yes, Jesus, but no one else I hang around with is following you.

Think about that. You won't always be able to push beyond those things that are holding you back, holding us back. But you and I – we – can all sometimes push beyond our hesitation and boldly step out in faith.

And believe me, it doesn't take too many steps alongside Jesus to start changing your life for the better, and the lives of others. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Christ Jesus, you continue to call us today, to ministry and service. Help us, Lord, to remember our call, and to respond in many and numerous ways.

Lord, teach us how to help share the Gospel.

Remind us, O Lord, that we can bring change and help build a nation and a world where those in need have the chance to rise above their circumstances.

We pray for those in need this day: For Connie Barker as she continues to seek an effective cancer treatment.

We pray for all those we know in need of God's grace and mercy, care and concern.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we
forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**