

“Following Jesus: ... Challenges and Opportunities”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 16

New Testament Lesson: Luke 9:57-62

In two weeks, we wrap up our Summer Forum study of the Apostles' Creed and launch into a new study that promises both challenges and opportunities. Do you know how I know it provides both challenges and opportunities? Because the leader's guide is titled “Following Jesus: Challenges and Opportunities.”

Following Jesus does present its own challenges, doesn't it? And it promises opportunities – the wondrous opportunity of following Jesus in word and deed, in embracing God, in worshiping here, in striving for truth and justice, in sharing our faith, and in giving of ourselves for the sake of another. Wondrous opportunities, for those who truly follow Jesus.

Each of those ways of following Jesus – in word and deed, worship, study, Christian hospitality and service – form the basis of the Summer Forum when it begins a new study on July 21. I encourage everyone to check it out. And in the meantime – for today – let's look at the way we as individuals, we as a church, and we as a society follow Jesus.

In our brief-but-powerful gospel reading today, Jesus turns to us and says, “Follow me.” And he points to the challenges and opportunities of doing so. Jesus encounters three different people on his way to Jerusalem, three people who represent three different responses to Jesus' invitation to “follow him.”

The first person Jesus encounters says to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” This is the type of person who likes the idea of following Jesus – likes to think they're a good follower – and yet they really don't know what it takes, what it mean to follow Jesus. Jesus responds, saying, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

Here, Jesus is pointing to the continuous, ongoing processes of following him. When we become followers of Jesus, there is no destination to reach, like if only I had more peace and tranquility I could stop working on myself, stop paying attention to my spiritual growth (if we pay attention to it at all): There is no thing to achieve and no blessing to receive that finally has us content as a follower of Jesus, certain we've done our job and now we can sit back.

If you're looking for easy street for yourself or your family so you can finally coast through life, that's not what Jesus is offering. You may be blessed with much happiness, with a family of successful children, with long life, health and vitality, with a great girlfriend or boyfriend, with the perfect job or some other wonderful thing in life, and still, there is more available to you as a follower of Jesus.

There is no finish line. No coming in first, last or somewhere in between. There is only the journey, with Jesus alongside us to help; to help us make the right choices, take the right turns, set the right pace, through good times and bad.

And that is both a challenge and an opportunity – the challenge of keeping the faith and being the church come-what-may and the opportunity of being guided by Jesus to the blessings God has for you – sometimes hidden blessings, the blessings of drawing closer to God than you could ever imagine. Challenges and opportunities, when we journey alongside Jesus.

The next person Jesus encounters is actually invited by Jesus to follow him. And he responds saying, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus says to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Here, we see what happens when we prioritize our family obligations, our social lives over our commitment to God, instead of letting our commitment to God lead us in all we do. At the time of Jesus, social obligation required that the eldest son be available to attend to the burial of his father. So in fact, it may have been that the father wasn't even dead yet, and the guy just wanted to hang out waiting for "what if, what next."

If you're waiting for "what if" or "what's next" before you get out there following Jesus, before you take that next step – if you're waiting because you'll get to it later then Jesus is saying to you, Now's the time. Think about it. Is there something keeping you from attending Sunday school or a Bible study, participating in a mission outing, coming to worship every Sunday, helping out when asked, or , extending an invitation to others?

If so, what's the cost of waiting? What's the cost to you, your family, society and the church when we allow social obligations, excuses or our own self-centered choices to keep us from participating in church, from doing the work of ministry, from being the hands and feet and heart of Jesus? Think about that – the challenges and opportunities of putting Jesus first.

Another person said to Jesus, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

“No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” How many of us sit here looking back, sit here thinking how things used to be. Is that really what Jesus is calling us to do?

Or is Jesus calling us to move forward, to move onward and upward – through our Mission Statement: In Service to All God’s Children and Their Families, through our Discipleship Pathway posted in the hallway and included in your bulletin today, where it says:

Fellowship and Small Groups, an invitation to go deeper; Worship, a place to find comfort, purpose, affirmation and inspiration; Christian Education, being equipped to invite others to go deeper; and Missions and Ministry Teams, making the world a better place.

Each of these areas of church represents your next step on the Discipleship Pathway. Jesus is challenging us to consider where we are on this pathway and to keep moving along, going a little deeper, taking that next step. Challenges and opportunities when we look ahead, not back.

Looking ahead and not back is a struggle for us as human beings, I get that. It’s a struggle for us as a society. We are struggling with that politically right now, as we anticipate the 2020 presidential elections, just two Novembers away. And we struggle with that – looking back or moving forward; we struggle with it as a church.

Jesus is telling us that our future lies ahead of us – not behind us – ahead of us with the two young ladies who provided our special music on June 23 – one a new church member along with her mom, Shawna Steeves, Shawna and Meghan, and the other her friend, Janna, whose grandmother, Mona, has recently come alongside us for church activities, also. Looking ahead. Looking ahead with the two, new neighborhood couples – each couple in a different stage of life – each couple who has said they want to join the church, when the time is right for them. I hope that will be soon, and that we can have them join together, on the same day.

That’s my hope, that’s my commitment and prayer as pastor, to help move that along as the Spirit would lead. My fear is we spend so much time looking back that we neglect to see what God has placed out ahead of us, and to pay attention to that, to cultivate that future.

This is our opportunity as a church and your opportunity as an individual to hear Jesus call anew, when he says to us – says to you – “Follow me.” Journey alongside me, even if that means always being on the move, never looking back, always moving ahead.

When we commit to journeying with Jesus, to putting Jesus first, to looking ahead for what God is just waiting to do for us and through us, there are so many wonderful places to go in our faith, so many hidden blessings to receive, so much growth and vitality to celebrate, even now, right here in this sanctuary, today.

Take a moment to look around – not at what’s missing – but at what is here – a family of faith that would do anything for one another, God’s word alive and celebrated in word and sacrament, and new life, new members and friends, both here and those awaiting our invitation – your invitation to come alongside us, in following Jesus. Just look around.

In that Spirit, in the Spirit of Jesus’ call to you, let us all commitment anew right now to following Jesus, as together we joyfully, confidently, and expectantly move forward wherever he may lead. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER - *Saint Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556)*

One: Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve;

Many: To give and not to count the cost;

One: To fight and not to heed the wounds;

Many: To toil and not to seek for rest;

One: To labor and not to ask for any reward,

ALL: Except the reward of knowing that we do your will. ...

Lord, we do seek to do your will, knowing that a life of prayer is central to a life in Christ. So we pray now for those in need of your compassion, your provision, your healing, your comfort and peace, for those we name in the quiet of this moment.

We pray all this in your powerful name, Lord Jesus, and raising our eyes to have and our voices in song for the prayer that you taught us:

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.