

Last week we heard about Jesus freeing a man and a whole community from being enslaved by demonic forces. After that, the gospel writer, Luke tells us that Jesus sent the disciples out to proclaim the gospel. Luke says, “He ‘gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases and he sent them to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.” After that some of the disciples saw Jesus transfigured on a mountaintop as he spoke with Elijah and Moses. They’ve seen him heal people and they’ve sat at his feet as he taught about what being great in God’s kingdom looks like.

But, after all that, still their **first** reaction when someone rejects their teacher is violence. Sure, it was the hated Samaritans that they wanted God to incinerate, but still! The Samaritans say, “No, we don’t want you in our town. Your leader is headed to Jerusalem so we know he’s not one of us.” So, the disciples say, “Ok, if you’re not for us you’re against us so we’ll ask God to burn you all – men, women and children” It’s Game of Thrones judgement for sure! That didn’t go well for Dani. Jesus doesn’t like it much either!

So, Jesus rebukes them sternly and they go on to the next town and almost as a road map laid out for us all to see what the point is we have three people just starting out on the path of discipleship, following Jesus. Three people who think they’re ready to live the discipleship life.

The first, says he wants to go **wherever** Jesus goes.

The second, wants to follow Jesus but first he needs to take care of his family responsibilities.

The third wants just a little time to say good-bye to his family before he follows Jesus.

In answering each person Jesus deepens the demands of what it means to follow him; to be his disciple. “Foxes have dens and the birds in the sky have nests, but the Jesus has no place to lay his head.”

“Let the dead bury their own dead. But you go and spread the news of God’s kingdom.”

“No one who puts a hand on the plow and looks back is fit for God’s kingdom.”

It seems as if Jesus has never read a book on Church Growth or has even heard of “How to Win Friends and Influence People”! Instead of highlighting the benefits of discipleship; trying to sell them on discipleship by describing how it will enhance their lives and relationships Jesus **guarantees** them that their lives will not be their own. When they follow him, they’ll give up their security. They’ll give up relationships. When they make the commitment to follow Jesus it will be their guiding compass for the rest of their lives.

Discipleship, following Jesus isn’t for wimps. It isn’t for the faint of heart or the fickle. Jesus says this commitment changes **everything**: every other relationship is relativized, every other choice in life is contingent upon this one. If you set your foot on the path of discipleship, Jesus says, there’s no compromise.

Does that terrify you as much as it does me?

Actually, what I have found is that there are 2 camps of terrified people who show up in church and then there are those who are not terrified in the least. For those who are **not** terrified by Jesus all-encompassing claim on disciples' lives, Jesus is irrelevant or even non-existent. They are not terrified because Jesus is nothing more than a teacher or a good person for them; certainly no one who could put a claim on their lives.

But, for the rest of us the two camps of terrified people include those people who are terrified to think that Jesus is going to ask **too much** of them and those who fear that they're being asked **too little**.

The first group is terrified that Jesus is going to ask them to leave their homes, their families and security behind and go far away where they may have 'nowhere to lay their head' like Jesus. These are the folks who may have felt that God's call on them meant they'd have to go to Africa or South America and be missionaries to live as fully committed disciples.

And then there's the other group of terrified folks. They're the ones afraid of being asked to commit too little. They usually get what Jesus is saying. They hear the strong demands that Jesus is making in this reading and throughout the New Testament. They hear the call to give their **whole** lives to following Jesus. The terror they feel is because the **church** is asking too little. They hear Jesus' demands and alongside that they hear the church saying, it's all good. You can carry on with your life as usual. God loves you. Just be a good person and come to church. You'll be fine. These folks hear that and they are terrified that that **is all there is**. Following Jesus really asks nothing of them more than being good; showing up to church once in a while. They hear that and they recognize the emptiness. They long for the meaning and purpose they thought Jesus offered but the church soft pedals the commitment and offers instead: comfort, soothing words without demand.

In reality, I think most often those aren't two camps of **different** terrified people. Most often it's the same people, swinging between the two fears: sometimes fearing too much is being asked of them; sometimes fearing too little is being asked. That's where I find myself anyway and I don't think I'm alone. I want to fully commit to following Jesus and yet, I want security. I want to care for my family. I want meaning and purpose in my life that following Jesus gives but I also want my retirement fund to be there when I need it.

There is hope in this reading today but it's hope that has nothing to do with **our** commitment, whether we hope for more commitment or fear too much commitment is required.

Turns out that the only commitment that **ultimately** matters is Jesus' commitment and he never wavers. When time grows short; when his ministry is coming to an end Jesus **determined** to go to Jerusalem and all that waited for him there: abuse, pain and humiliation, death. Other translations say that Jesus "set his face" for Jerusalem or "resolutely set out" for Jerusalem. **That**

commitment is the one that ultimately matters for all of us. Jesus was **determined** to go to Jerusalem. Jesus lived the commitment he was teaching.

When the religious and political leaders had Jesus tortured and nailed to a cross he did NOT call down fire upon them. When faced with pain and humiliation in Jerusalem Jesus went **anyway** because that is what his commitment required. When it was clear that God would not “take away the cup that Jesus was to drink from” Jesus did not wait until it was a good time for his family for him to be gone; he did not go back to say goodbye or to bury his dead. Once he set his hand to the plow, **Jesus** did not look back.

Jesus’ commitment was total. He went all the way to Jerusalem; all the way to the cross; all the way **through** pain and suffering and into death so that God could put an **end** to the power of pain and suffering and death. Jesus went through it all so that he would be with us in **our** pain and suffering and death. And God raised Jesus out of that death to put an end to the **power** of suffering and death forever.

Jesus’ commitment to saving us, all of us, all of humanity was total! Full stop. End of story. Nothing more was **or is** required for your salvation. God will never stop loving you. God will let nothing separate you from God EVER. God will hold you and love you through all of life, through all suffering and sadness and pain, through death and into eternity because of Jesus’ commitment. It has nothing to do with your commitment or your lack of commitment.

So, why does Jesus go on so often about the requirements of discipleship if he’s already got it all covered? What’s the point of all the examples: if you follow me you won’t have a home to call your own; you’ll have to put that commitment to discipleship before your family, before your work, before everything? If Jesus’ commitment is the one that counts what’s with all the talk of ‘taking up your cross’ and following Jesus?

Turns out the apostle Paul said it in our first reading: “Christ has set us free for freedom. Therefore, stand firm and don’t submit to the bondage of slavery again.” Christ’s commitment ended the power of sin and death forever. Christ set us free so that we never have to live as slaves again: slaves to whatever the culture thinks we should be like; slaves to trying to find meaning anywhere but in Christ; slaves to being anyone other than who God created us to be. We are free because of Christ’s commitment and he **invites** us to commit to what is truly important: “going to spread the news of God’s kingdom” as he told the second person in today’s story.

And that news of God’s kingdom that disciples are to commit their life to spreading is that God has set us free from **everything** that enslaves us; everything that binds us or distorts us or shrinks us. God has set us free to live full and meaningful lives; lives that spread the news of God’s kingdom through our words and through the very fabric of our lives to show that God loves everyone and God has set us free to love God and each other.

Turns out we don't **have to** leave our lives here behind and go to Africa to be a missionary. But, maybe God is **inviting** you to do that. Maybe that would be faithful discipleship and freedom you are called to.

Turns out we don't **have to** give away all of our stuff and all of our money but maybe God is inviting you to do that. Maybe all of that stuff and money has gotten in the way of fully following Jesus so your freedom would be in giving it all away.

Turns out we don't have to **do** anything. But, God is **inviting us** to put God first in **every** part of our lives; let nothing else sit in the place of highest importance in our hearts – because nothing else is capable of guiding our lives without distorting us or them.

When we put **family** first, our family life becomes distorted. Families were never meant to be God. They were meant to be a place where God's love is lived in relationships of self-giving so that we are all nurtured in that love.

When we put our **work** first, our work and all of our lives become distorted. Work becomes not a means to caring for ourselves and those we've been given to care for. It becomes an end in itself. Work was not meant for that. It was not meant to give us meaning. It was meant to enable us to live the meaning given to us as God's children by caring for those we love: our families and all our neighbors.

When we put our **country** first, our country becomes distorted. Countries are means of caring for people; structuring our lives so that all people can live in peace and prosperity. Some countries are better at that than others. Some times in history have shown different forms of government to be better at providing people with stability and peace. But, they are not an end in themselves and cannot give us the **meaning** that is meant to come from our relationship with Jesus. We give thanks for our country that gives us many freedoms. But, when our country takes center place in our hearts, meant only for God, even a good form of government becomes distorted.

When we put **church** first, our church becomes distorted. Churches are God's gift to us to nurture community so that we can love God and love our neighbor with our whole lives. **Jesus** is central to our lives not the church. Our church is the **means** to a life of freedom in Christ. They are **not Christ**. They are not the end in themselves. Churches can make mistakes even when we try to follow God's Spirit. Churches have at times excluded the very people who Jesus called us to love. Churches have been guilty of genocide and oppression, not Jesus. Only when Jesus is central to our life together does church work the way it was intended to. That's when it all makes sense.

Jesus invites us to a life centered on God so that we can live free; free to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Free to live lives that reflect the Spirit of God; lives of: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit. Amen.