

Following Jesus

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Luke 9:

[51] When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

[52] And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him;

[53] but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

[54] And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?"

[55] But he turned and rebuked them.

[56] And they went on to another village.

[57] As they were going along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

[58] And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

[59] To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

[60] But he said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

[61] Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

[62] Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Grace to you and peace, from God Our Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus The Christ!

Ruby McIntyre was a very determined, hard-working African American woman in Kansas City, Missouri who cooked some of the best soul food in the world. She was in her late 80's and 90's when I knew her. I made it a point to eat at her place at least once a month during the time I was in Kansas City. We got to know each other pretty well. She loved to talk about most everything. And she was very opinionated. And very religious and meant no disrespect when she called me "Rev." During the years I knew her she was robbed at gunpoint, had a brain tumor removed, cooked for President Clinton in the White House and one day, when rowdy customers had to be put straight, Ruby hollered, "Rev., close your ears," before letting go such

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a stream of ungodly scolding that Jesus' own disciples would have scattered faster than they did out of Gethsemane when the Roman soldiers appeared.

Ruby could have been a Marine drill sergeant. On a wall just inside the front entrance of her place was a sign that read, "This is not Burger King. Here you do not have it your way! You have it my way, or it's the d— highway!" Ruby.

I thought of Ruby when I read today's Gospel. Here you do not have it your way! I'm talking about what Jesus said about following him, being his disciple.

We are now into what are known as the "hard sayings" of Jesus. We're into some sobering, serious stuff. It's not meant to make us feel good or to elevate the power of positive thinking. It's meant to help us do a disciple-ship checkup. I don't know how much mileage you have on your disciple-ship, how many miles you've sailed for Jesus on life's tranquil and stormy seas, but every so often, Jesus' disciples need to come in for a checkup. And today is it.

How do you understand what it means to be a disciple of Jesus? Does your understanding conflict with Jesus' stated requirements?

What does today's Gospel say? Let me give us a quick 1, 2, 3 summary. From the top down.

Following Jesus means following the One who is irrevocably determined to travel the road of self-giving, sacrificial love, even unto death, to accomplish God's saving redemption. All that is built into the phrase "he set his face to go to Jerusalem". Jerusalem – the City of The Wholeness of God – God's Shalom – where everyone and everything is God's way! We're not talking about the earthly Jerusalem. We're talking about the New Jerusalem.

Following Jesus means taking direction, being sent, announcing his coming to others and sometimes being rejected by people who do not want to be a part of Jesus' movement.

Following Jesus means being subject to being corrected when we come up with crazy ideas, like wanting to use violence to get things done. It could be physical violence like James and John suggested or it could be spiritual violence like insisting that the way you believe about God is the way everyone else has to believe. Jesus rejects violence. And his followers have to reject it as well.

Following Jesus means that you will have to travel lightly with the things of this world. In other words, following Jesus does not mean you will be guaranteed any certain standard of living. You might even be homeless.

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Following Jesus means moving beyond your personal feelings about death to a completely new way of living life. Jesus has been raised from the dead! And those who follow him live out of a belief in the Resurrection to Eternal Life.

Following Jesus means going out and proclaiming the Kingdom or the Reign of God. It means announcing God's loving design and plan for everyone and everything on this earth and urging people to come and willingly subject themselves to God's reign. It means telling everyone about what God has done in Christ and inviting them to commit themselves to Jesus' way of self-giving, sacrificial love. The Reign of God means putting everything in subjection to the Lordship of Christ and following all of Jesus' teachings.

Following Jesus means he has to come before even your closest family members.

I don't know about you, but I believe these characteristics of a would-be follower of Jesus make it a very difficult thing to follow Him.

Is it any wonder that Jesus said, "Many are called, but few are chosen?" (Matthew 22:14) Is it any wonder that some people who start coming to church fall by the wayside? Is it any wonder that the institutional church is on the steady decline? The Presbyterian Outlook magazine reported that the Presbyterian Church USA lost a net 67,712 communicant members last year. They stated, "Statistically, we are not losing people to other churches. Our problem is that we are losing our people to the secular world—to no active church affiliation." Our Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton reported in February of this year that the ELCA is losing 70,000 members per year, or the equivalent of an entire Synod. According to The American Enterprise Institute as of April, 2019, 50% of the people in the United States are unchurched. Hill Avenue Grace has around 225 on the rolls, yet we do good to see 65 in worship on Sunday, or 29%. In today's post-modern world, going to church occasionally is now regarded as normal. Of course, going to church does not make you a Christian. But being a Christian means you want to be a part of Christ's community. Christianity is not a do-it-yourself affair or have-it-my-way affair.

Following Jesus is a very difficult thing to do. Even if we want to. The question is: do we want to?

As Rev. Grant Gallup, a missionary in Nicaragua, reports, "The hard fact of the matter is that most of us most of the time don't want to follow Jesus, we want Him to follow us. We would like him to be available to us as we go on our self-appointed rounds, to keep us safe, well fed and tucked into warm beds at night, protected on our way, our GPS's up-to-date, our credit cards at the ready. We will get our 'post it' notes off the refrigerator door or from our iPhones and see what it is we will do today, what we will buy, what we will sell, where we will go....we

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respond to [Jesus'] call, as did Augustine in his youth, 'Yes, Lord, but not yet.'"¹

We want it our way!

A young boy burst into his mother's kitchen one afternoon and announced that he had promised God that he would give up fighting. "That's wonderful," his mother replied. "I promised to begin tomorrow." "Why not today?" asked his mother. "O.K., today" the lad replied. "I'll begin at four o'clock." "But it's twenty minutes till four," his mother observed. "Yeah," said the boy, "that gives me twenty minutes to find Larry and punch him in order to make us even."

An older denominational hymnal included the hymn "Jesus Demands My All" on page #364. At the bottom of the page, it read, "For an easier version, see #365.

We are always looking for the easier version. We are also easily distracted by worldly things. Every day we are faced with choices which call us to look backwards, and away from the kingdom. Jesus does demand our all. Everything else must be informed by our commitment to Christ.

When Whistler was at the height of his artistic career, a wealthy person purchased one of his paintings on the condition that the artist would accompany him home to hang it. After the man held the painting on one wall, then another, ad infinitum, Whistler finally said, "You are going about this all wrong. What you must do is remove all the furnishings from the room, hang the painting where it will be best displayed... and then arrange the furniture in relationship to the painting."

As we can keep our focus on Christ and develop our lives around that focus, we will come close to understanding the meaning of Christian Discipleship. Instead of offering ourselves to Christ on our terms, what Jesus wants from us is discipleship on his terms.² Not my way. Not your way. His way.

His way is summed up beautifully in today's Second Lesson where we have what are called The Fruits of The Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

¹ GRANT M. GALLUP Apartado RP-10 CASA AVE MARIA Managua, Nicaragua C.A. Tel. 011-505-2662165 gallup@tmx.com.ni GRITS 3rd series now on-line: <http://newark.rutgers.edu/~lcrew/homilygrits>

² Thanks to Dr. Dan Flanagan's sermon, "Focused On The Kingdom".

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How is your disciple-ship? How does it check out? Will we continue to insist that it be our way?

In his book "The Quest for the Historical Jesus", Albert Schweitzer tells us luminously that "He comes to us as one unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow me', and sets us to the same task which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery they shall learn in their own experience who He is."

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds focused on Christ Jesus and His Way!

Amen.

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