



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott Schul

3rd Sunday after Pentecost: June 30, 2019

Sermon Title: "Follow with Love"

Gospel Text: Luke 9:51-62

Every life is filled with turning points: moments where one's story has the potential of proceeding in a variety of directions. The first time you meet the person who becomes your spouse... Choosing a profession... Accepting a job... These are all turning points in one's life. Today's Gospel takes us into the *key* turning point in the life of Jesus - that moment when Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." This is the moment when Jesus has utter clarity concerning *who* and *what* he is. He *knows* where he must *go*. He *knows* what he must *do*. And so from this point forward in Luke's Gospel, we slowly, steadily, relentlessly follow Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem, to the cross, and to his arrest, death, and resurrection - events that will crush sin and bring about the death of death itself.

One major turning point in my life was when I became a father. I was thinking a lot about that this past week as our daughter celebrated another birthday. As you can imagine, our adoption of her as a little baby was preceded by years of planning. We thought a *lot* about what being parents would mean, and the joys, challenges, and responsibilities it all would entail. We also talked to a lot of other people who were thinking about becoming parents, in order to get their perspective. In the end, I think all of us were wrestling with this question: "Are we *really* ready to be parents?"

Some of those prospective parents answered that question with an enormous amount of self-confidence. "Of course we're ready! We're going to have the BEST kids – well behaved, beautiful, smart, and motivated for success!" Ever heard someone say that? I suppose at one point or another every prospective parent suffers from those delusions of grandeur, but after a week or two of dirty diapers and sleep deprivation, that confidence is rightly shattered. There are no perfect kids, just as there are no perfect parents. No mom or dad gets it right all the time.

Another common attitude we heard was this: "It'll be great to be a parent someday, but not right now. I have things I *want* and *need* to do first. I want to establish my career... travel the world... become financially stable... put down some roots... and have a little 'me time.'" But is there every really an objectively "right" time to become parents? If you go into parenting thinking that it will *ever* be convenient, well-ordered, or well-timed, then most days you're going to be sadly disappointed.

There's one final perspective we heard from prospective parents, and this is probably the one Linda and I most often fell into. It goes like this: "We'd like to have kids, but we have to put a lot of study and thought into this before we feel comfortable taking on this daunting responsibility." And so we read and studied all the child psychology and parenting books we

could get our hands on. And you know what we learned? We learned that there is no book on earth that can fully and completely prepare someone to be a parent. Most days, parenting is one big, improvisational, seat-of-the-pants, hold-on-for-dear-life circus.

So what *does* makes a good parent? Perfection is impossible; there's never a truly "right" time to have kids; and all the books and study in the world won't be enough to prepare you for it. The only thing that makes a good mom or dad is love – the kind of love that is unconditional, unending, selfless, and sacrificial; the kind of love that can endure stinky diapers, even stinkier attitudes, bruised arms and broken hearts, and calls in the middle of the night that start with, "Dad, I'm in a mess and I really need your help..." Love and love alone makes a parent.

Now, I realize that this may seem irrelevant for those who don't have children. But I've detailed these three perspectives because they aren't limited to prospective parents. Indeed, not everyone shares this calling to be a parent. But Jesus has called each and every one of us to be *disciples*, and we all struggle to follow that call because of these same three perspectives. They hold us back just as they held back the people in today's Gospel.

For example, consider the first prospective follower Jesus met along the road - the one who said, "I will follow you wherever you go." Sounds like exactly the kind of person Jesus would want as a follower, right? But Jesus immediately recognized that person's overconfidence. That prospective disciple is just like the prospective parents who think parenting will be a breeze and an unqualified success. And so Jesus delivered a cold splash of reality. "Hey, before you get too excited about this, let's be clear what you're signing up for. I'm not calling people to a luxury vacation, a powerful army, or a movement where everyone is going to automatically like you and treat you like a hero. Far from it. Common animals will experience more creature comforts than the very Son of God."

Those cautionary words from Jesus ring just as true today. I hope you are sensing Jesus calling you to a deeper, more committed life of discipleship. I hope you are feeling the Spirit stirring and moving in your heart. Following Jesus is the way of *joy*. But *joy* isn't always the same as *happiness*. There are days when it'll seem a lot easier to walk the world's way. But don't give up. *Following Jesus is what you were made to do*. Following Jesus is the way to *peace* too. But *peace* isn't always the same as the *absence of conflict*. Not everyone will treat you kindly just because you follow Jesus. It's not a guarantee of wealth or popularity. But don't give up. *Following Jesus is the only path to true wholeness and fulfillment*.

What about those other two prospective followers: the one who wants to first bury his father and the other who just wants to say farewell to his family? Jesus seems unduly harsh in his response. I think the meaning here is intended to be more symbolic than literal. These two prospective followers are like the prospective parents I described who delay and delay either because they have a laundry list of higher priorities or they want to wait until they are perfectly prepared for the calling before them.

Are you struggling to make time in your busy life to pray and worship? Do you feel God calling you to serve your neighbor, but you keep putting it off until you get *this* thing done at work, *that* thing accomplished at home, or *this* goal met? Guess what: there is no convenient

time to be a disciple. Just as Jesus called the disciples to walk away from their nets so they could embrace something even better, what is Jesus calling you *from* so that you can be called *to* something even better? Maybe you're holding back because you don't think you know enough about your faith. You tell yourself you'll get more involved when you understand this whole Jesus business a little more and when you're perfectly prepared to be a follower. But Jesus didn't confine his followers to scholars and religious experts. He called fishermen, tax collectors, the forgotten, the broken, and the marginalized. Whatever your circumstances, *right now* he's calling you too.

So what *does* makes a good follower of Jesus? Love – the kind of love *Jesus gives us* and the kind of love he calls us to *share*: love that is unconditional, unending, selfless, and sacrificial; the kind of love that can endure difficult conditions and difficult people, as well as bruised feelings and broken hearts; the kind of love that enables us at our most broken moments to start a prayer by saying, “Jesus, I’m in a mess and I really need your help...” Love and love alone makes a disciple.

So are you *really* ready to be a disciple? Yes – solely because *you* are loved! And so, empowered and transformed by that simple reality, be a disciple. Go and love one another. Amen.