

On Letting Go

Luke 9:51-62

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

A number of years ago two friends and I decided to undertake a backpacking trip in the Smokey Mountains, near Gatlinburg, TN. The trip consisted of about thirty miles of hiking over the course of three days and two nights. In total, we were out on the trail for a little over forty-eight hours. We planned on setting up camp at various places along the trail. It was interesting the different ways that the three of us packed our backpacks and prepared for this short trip. While two of us packed rather lightly and took only what we thought we would need since, after all, we were going to be carrying everything on our backs, the third fellow decided to follow a different strategy. He wanted to make certain that he was prepared for every possible situation during these two nights and three days. He packed a shovel in case a hole needed to be dug. He packed various gadgets he thought may come in handy. He packed a chair so that he could sit down comfortably. The list went on until his pack weighed over fifty pounds!

Throughout the trip I and the other friend were grateful for some of the things that this third friend carried along with him. In many ways we benefited from what we saw was over-packing. Yet, there were other ways in which his strategy of over-preparedness prevented him from hiking effectively. In his endeavor to gain complete control over the hiking trip and anticipate everything that could go wrong and attempt to be prepared for it, he became fatigued faster. He had a difficult time keeping up with the other two hikers. His heavy pack often left him off balance.

I tell you this story because I think at times that this is how we can follow the path of discipleship as Christians. Just like this friend packed heavy in an attempt to gain complete control over the situation and be prepared for every circumstance, at times we as Christians can confidently hold onto material things and certain habits that prevent us from faithfully following our Lord Jesus on the path of discipleship. In confidently holding onto certain things and habits we may do two harmful things. First, we may develop a kind of *overconfidence as disciples*. Second, we may create a kind of *conditional discipleship*.

In our Gospel reading we find Jesus and his disciples carrying out the Public Ministry of teaching, preaching, and performing miracles that announce the coming reign of God to earth in the person of Jesus, the Messiah. As they are traveling three individuals confront Jesus. All three of them desire to follow Jesus as disciples. Yet, none of the three appropriately model Christian discipleship.

The first individual that stops Jesus expresses *overconfident discipleship*. We learn in our Gospel reading that Jesus has “set his face toward Jerusalem” (Lk 9:51). Jerusalem is where Jesus would do what needed to be done for the salvation of the whole world. The path to Golgotha was a lonely path that he had to travel alone. For the sake of the forgiveness of your sins and mine, no one else could carry *that* cross on *that* day and die *that* death. Yet, this first individual that Jesus meets along the road in our Gospel reading assumes that he can and will go wherever Jesus goes. His understanding of discipleship is tainted by overconfidence.

In the 1946 Broadway musical, *Annie Get Your Gun*, two characters sing a spirited duet, with one male singer and one female singer attempting to outdo each other in increasingly complex tasks. During the song, they argue playfully about who can, for example, sing softer, sing higher, sing sweeter, and hold a note for longer. They boast of their abilities and accomplishments such as opening safes and living on bread and cheese. The song's most memorable lines are familiar to most of us, "Anything you can do I can do better; I can do anything better than you" (Wikipedia, *Annie Get Your Gun*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anything_You_Can_Do_%28song%29). This seems to be the kind of understanding of discipleship that this first individual demonstrates. We may become overconfident in our Christian living when we underestimate the power of temptation that is present in movies, music, and internet searches. We may overconfidently assume that Satan and his temptations are no match for us. This is the kind of overconfidence that does not result in godly Christian discipleship.

The second and third individuals that Jesus and his disciples confront along the way express *conditional discipleship*. To both of these individuals Jesus said the same two words that he said to his Twelve Disciples when he called them into discipleship. He said, "Follow me" (Lk 9:59). Yet, in contrast to the Twelve Disciples who "left everything and followed Jesus at his command" (Jn 1:37; Mt 19:27; Lk 18:24-34), these two individuals present conditions to Jesus. In both of these situations we see the same kind of conditional response that we observed with the prophet Elisha in our Old Testament reading. There is an attempt to place conditions upon following Jesus as a disciple. It is as if these individuals are saying, "I will follow you but only if I can be the one in charge and do it my way." This begs the question then of who is following and who is leading? Does the follower really trust Jesus to lead? Through his response to these individuals Jesus shows the danger of calculating discipleship.

Who is the person or what are the things that you are holding onto that lead you to be a *conditional disciple*? Like that hiker in the beginning of the sermon, are you trying to assert too much control? In subtle ways are you making the Christian life more about you being the leader and God agreeing to your conditions? And so we might say, "Lord, only if I do not have to go to Church every Sunday." Or, "I will follow you, Lord, only if it does not affect my lifestyle, financial situation, or family life." These are the kind of conditionals with which we all struggle and will continue in an increasingly non-Christian and even anti-Christian culture. The recent Supreme Court ruling that overturned the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) is good example of direction our culture is headed. Yet, that does not change our Lord's Word regarding Christian discipleship. It is built on unconditional trust in him as the leader.

Our Gospel reading reminds us this morning that as Christian disciples only Jesus knows the way and we are just going to have to let him lead. He doesn't tell us there are conditions. He doesn't leave room for overconfidence. You can trust him fully. He is reliable. The Jesus that leads you in discipleship through this world is the same Jesus who once set his face to Jerusalem to confront sin, evil, and rebellion. It looked like it would win. But it did not win. God vindicated Jesus by raising him from the dead. Our hope in this life is that we are held blameless before God now through forgiveness of sins in Christ and you will be fully and completely right with God at his return on the Last Day. So you can let go of what you are confidently holding onto and trust him. You have a *reliable Jesus* because he will save even though in this life you don't know in advance where he leads us. Amen.