

Sermon Pentecost 3C
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All Saints, Mt. Pleasant
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Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 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.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

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Have you braved the “friendly skies” this summer? The Friday before last was the highest-traffic day for air travel reported since last Thanksgiving. But the combination of a surge in summer travelers on the one hand with staff shortages and covid-related absences on the other, air travel has been like the Wild Wild West this summer. Flight cancellations, itinerary changes and surprise updates have all contributed to the mounting chaos these last weeks and months. But despite the insanity, we continue to do it. Because for many of us it’s worth it. The people and places we’ve waited 2 years to visit are enough to drive us to enter the fray.

The whole process of air travel, especially these days, and it’s a good metaphor for life. You make your plans, and sometimes they work out, and sometimes they don’t. And as you make your way from ticket purchase to your final destination, you go through this series of encounters and gatekeepers. Just think about all the stops along the way, from the ticket counter to security to the gate to the seating process. Sometimes you’re in a holding pattern, other times your free to wander. There are hurdles to overcome and little victories, unforeseen setbacks, and then the sweet relief of finally getting where you’re headed.

If you’ve lived enough years, whether you’re an air traveler or not, you have experienced all these things in your life: acceptance, rejection, success, frustration, smiling faces, grouchy gatekeepers and hopefully, a few kind strangers along the way. And in life as in air travel, your mental and spiritual attitude Can go a LONG WAY to help you and those around you have a better experience on the journey.

We have entered into the season of Pentecost, “Ordinary Time” as it’s also referred to on the church calendar, and throughout this season, the focus is on the life of discipleship. Everyday, ordinary situations followers of Jesus find themselves in along the journey. If we think about it, most of Jesus’ teachings happen along the journey. As he and his disciples are walking along the road, or stopping along their way. Many of the gospel stories begin just like today’s does, “as they were going along the road.” And that’s partly because Jesus’ ministry was an itinerant ministry. He had a short time to get to as many towns and villages as he could before the big boys in Jerusalem would catch up with him. It’s also partly because discipleship is a journey.

Sometimes we are stopped in our tracks by those big God Moments - times you pause and take off your shoes, because you discover you are standing on holy Ground. But most of the time, discipleship is just a compilation of little things that happen along the way... A conversation on a long car ride, the kindness of a stranger, giving a second chance, just getting up and showing up, even when it's hard. That's discipleship. If someone asks you to talk about your faith, Likely, you won't rattle off a list of what you believe, you'll tell stories, share examples, encounters where God was in your midst when the Spirit was guiding you, when you felt Jesus' presence.

This past week, a few of us from All Saints had the opportunity to participate in Olive Branch AME Church's Vacation Bible School. And one day the high school class had an opportunity to share what they learned. Each student stood up in front of the other classes and gave examples of when they knew God was at work in their lives. One youth shared about a time when God helped her through a hospital stay. Another shared when a still small voice told him to walk away from a fight. One young woman shared how she prays for her mother to get home safely each night from her delivery job. A young man spoke about a time he and his mom prayed that his coach would recognize his God-given gifts.

When these young people looked back on their lives, these are the moments that stood out - some big, some small - but none of them planned, expected, or choreographed. Just simple moments of faith along the way. These are the places Jesus shows up, the teaching moments, the guiding moments. They're just encounters with others, encounters with the divine, as we travel along this journey called life.

With practice, it becomes easier and easier to recognize when God is working in these moments along the way. But sometimes the lessons from these encounters are not so easy. Today, as Jesus is traveling and teaching, he has some disturbing things to say. "Don't go bury your father. Don't go say goodbye to your family. Get ready to basically become homeless, because the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

On the surface, these teachings could be heard as a disrespect for home and family. And perhaps maybe that's why these are not the Bible verses we find inscribed in fancy script on wall hangings or day planners. But, like most things Jesus says, there is a deeper meaning underneath. Like we said, Jesus has a limited time to get his message out. He doesn't have time to beat around the bush. For those ready to become his disciples, Jesus wants them to know what they're getting into, and sometimes he uses shocking terms to make his point. "Let the dead bury their own dead. No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

The message is this: Want to follow Jesus? Then you gotta know that discipleship is not a hobby. It's not a part-time gig. It's a whole-life commitment, it's a whole new set of priorities. It's like stepping out of the life you lead and entering into a whole new realm, because no matter where you find yourself - at home or abroad - when you walk with God, everything will be different.

When God takes first place in your life, everything else falls into a different perspective. When Christ becomes your cornerstone, everything else shifts into place. When you begin to surrender your journey to the guiding of the Spirit, The priorities of the past no longer define you, and your future is in God's hands alone. These seemingly harsh directives from Jesus to forget the living and the dead are just a way to get the point across: "No excuses, no matter how valid. No worries, no matter how justifiable they are. You have one directive and one only: turn and FOLLOW ME."

Are we willing to stop with the excuses? Ours may not be as literal as the man who needed to turn back from Jesus to bury his father, But we make plenty of excuses not to follow him. "It's inconvenient, it's embarrassing, it's hard." Are we willing to stop with the worrying? "What will I wear? What will I eat? How will I make ends meet? Where will I be in 5 years? What if this makes me unpopular or even unliked?" Are we

willing to trust that God will provide? ...that God is enough, that God's good is enough, that God is good enough? Period? No if's, and's or but's.

Here's the thing about following Jesus. With him, if you're really on board, If you're all in, when you surrender everything to him, even though you never know where following him will take you, God does. This journey is not aimless. It has purpose, it has direction. When Jesus invited the people in today's story to leave everything to follow him, he knew where he was heading. Luke tells us that he had "set his face toward Jerusalem." He was on a journey to his destiny. He was heading to speak truth to power, to stand up to abuse, to model his way of nonviolent resistance, to lay down his life for his friends.

The journey Jesus invites us on is not aimless. It has a purpose. We have a purpose. We have gifts God is shaping and molding in us that will make a difference for the kingdom. We have those fruits of the spirit that we read about in Galatians this world is hungering for. We will teach and serve and feed and stand up and advocate and comfort and make peace in ways we could not even imagine. But God can. And what he has in store for our journey will bear fruit for the kingdom and will bless us in return.

Although the call to follow - fully follow - Jesus is challenging for us who like to know what's next, who like to play it safe, the promise is that the more we let go, the better the journey will be. The more we lean into our role as disciples the easier it will be to navigate those everyday encounters... the more "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control" will be ours.

I had to laugh at the thought of juxtaposing the image of those Fruits of the Spirit with the image of the crazy experience of air travel right now. Not a whole lot of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" going on in that arena... Don't these kinds of situations bring out people's true colors? Jammed up airports seem to bring out the worst and the best of people - from people "actin' a fool" when they don't get their way, to people acting selflessly when they see someone else in need.

You never know what kind of situation people are going through Are they just going on vacation? Or traveling home for a funeral? Heading to a new job? Or getting deployed? Are they newlyweds? Or newly widowed? The airport is like a super-condensed microcosm of all the life conditions people exist in. Which means it's also a great opportunity to practice discipleship, to allow the Fruit of the Spirit happen in and around you.

We are called to do one thing and one thing only - no matter where we are - Follow Jesus. Whether our journey is taking us across the country, across town, or our journey is marked by quietly passing the days at home, we represent Christ. It may not make headlines, it may never get recorded for social media, but the opportunity will arise - at home or abroad - to put God first, to show Grace, to share Christ, to the glory of his Kingdom.