

A pastor received a summons for jury duty, and she went to the courthouse just as the law required. During the process of selecting jurors for the actual trial, an attorney, noticed that she is a pastor, and asked:

Do you think you can render a verdict on this case without letting your religious beliefs affect your decision? She answered: **I hope that I would never make any decision without being affected by my religious beliefs, by my faith to guide and direct, to inform and help me decide.** At the attorney's request she was excused from serving on the jury... apparently faithful and committed Christian discipleship was not among the qualities he was looking for in a juror.

Faithful and committed discipleship is when our faith-relationship and spiritual journey with God does affect our every decision and choice in life... **for by striving to follow the example and teaching of Jesus, our faith will gradually permeate our whole being and our discipleship will be more than just words.** In today's Luke passage, his ministry in Galilee has ended, and Jesus is just beginning his journey toward Jerusalem. He set his face is an idiom meaning that with resolve, the Lord is focused on fulfilling his purpose, obedient to the will of God, - **costly betrayal and death for the sake of our salvation.** Nearing the end of his mortal life and earthly ministry, along this journey, Jesus is now focused on discipleship, preparing those he will leave behind to become the Church, for when he is "taken up" on the cross and at the ascension. More than just a destination, this journey is about discipleship and what it means to follow Jesus Christ, ... which is to embrace the path of obedience that Jesus walked... for Jesus is seeking and calling true and faithful disciples, who are willing to serve, love and follow which is something deeper and a bit more demanding than following him on Twitter or hitting "like" on Facebook. Skipping ahead in the text, along the way of this journey, a man enthusiastically volunteers to become his disciple.

Luke 9:56-58

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."

Clearly, this would-be disciple is drawn to join and follow, but his understanding of what is involved is weak and shallow. Jesus wants him to know the true cost before he promises to follow, and to know that discipleship is not about our comfort and ease, **for this world with all its stuff is not really our home.** Just as it was for

Jesus, faithful discipleship is a costly journey toward **our Jerusalem** that calls for sacrifice & service in obedience to God's will.

Luke 9:59-60

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."

That sounds harsh, even cruel to our ears and our 'sense of Jesus', but in that culture, the dead had to be buried within 24 hours. So had the father of this would-be disciple actually been dead, that son would have been holding vigil over the body and not have been out and about where Jesus was preaching. This man wants to wait until after his father **eventually dies**, and then, follow Jesus later when it would be more convenient. But that's not good enough. The call is to decide and follow Jesus, now.

Luke 9:61-62

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."

Those listening when Jesus first said this, would have understood the cultural nuances and inferences of this would-be disciple: - let me wait until I can make arrangements back home, - let me first get permission from my family to leave... but Jesus does not accept any higher authority over our lives. He alone must be our first priority and our ultimate loyalty, with no competing distractions, not even family or friends. Let's be honest, most of us would prefer and strive for our lives to be more smooth and easy, with no obstructions along the way. But being Christ's faithful disciple as he defines it is not about signing up for a complacent stroll through life. True discipleship, which is following the way and path of Jesus, is a life-long commitment of deepening and expanding faith as we increasingly surrender more of ourselves to God, **with his grace, truth, peace and call increasingly affecting every part and aspect of our lives**. This faithful discipleship is accomplished as over time and experience by, enduring this life's hurts, disappointments & challenges, our rough and arrogant edges can be worn away and smoothed, and we are thereby **made fit for the Kingdom of God**. Our difficulties, challenges and unpleasant struggles in life are what teaches us the most toward our spiritual development and accomplishes the most toward our fitness for God's Kingdom... **because desperation and defeat can create open space where the Holy Spirit can work and transform our lives**. Jesus wants to reset our priorities on the important areas of life, that we love God; heart, mind, soul and strength over all else,

and that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And if we can get that right, then all the rest will fall right into place. **In this passage, Jesus is saying some very hard things to hear, and his demands are difficult, uncomfortable and absolute.**

Jesus Christ himself has modeled the level of commitment he wants and commands, as in obedience to God, he journeyed toward Jerusalem where he was betrayed, beaten, crucified and died. Fellow travelers, we are invited and called to follow:

Matthew 16:24-25

Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

All 3 would-be disciples could have followed Jesus, but instead they offered excuses... it's too much, not convenient or not now. **Jesus called for commitment beyond mere words, and that same call to faithful discipleship comes down to us.**

So what does it take to distract or derail my faithfulness? What does it take for me to resent and refuse reconciliation? What does it take to keep me from participating in worship? What does it take to interfere with my Bible reading and prayer? How is the free offer of grace changing how I live my life? Now I don't believe that anyone comes to worship or joins the church intending to be inactive or lukewarm in their faith. Nevertheless, obstacles in life can and do hinder and interfere with our Christian faithfulness and effectiveness as disciples. At times we are totally faithful to our Lord's invitation to follow and sometimes we are not. **So is the point of this passage about threat and condemnation?, is it simply a demand that we do better and accomplish more?** Jesus was on the most direct route to Jerusalem going straight south passing through the region of Samaria. Jews and Samaritans, hated and resented each other with an intense animosity, and so they refused to receive Jesus, rejecting his message. We know that the way of Jesus leads to life and blessings, that he is worth following, but we have other things to do. We intend to follow, but decide to take care of other things first.

The truth is, you and I are like those Samaritans sometimes. All of us has at one time or another, have flatly refused to follow and go with Jesus. There have been times when we heard his call on our lives, and we knew what he was asking us to do, say or sacrifice, or what he was asking us to refrain from or stop doing ... and yet we persist in our stubborn refusal and disobedience. **That Samaritan village is every single one of us, at times.** In response to the stubborn rejection by the Samaritans, the disciples are ready to call down wrath and fire from

heaven eager to consume and punish those insolent Samaritans, who have dared offend and reject Jesus their Lord ... **but then, Jesus is a lot more disappointed with the disciples, rebuking his offended disciples, rather than the Samaritans.** And why is that? Because their plan and desire for a consuming fire of retribution went against all that Jesus came to accomplish. Because Jesus came to save sinners, losers and outcasts. Jesus was on his way to die for the redemption of **all God's children** that we might all live in loving relationship with our Creator. This is the season of God's grace, forbearance and mercy, not the time for wrath, judgement, burning and destruction. And when the time of judgement does finally arrive, it will be carried out by God, not by the disciples or by us. **And that is the point of this text and the message that I believe we of the Church most need to hear and heed.** In the news we see a world caught up in extremism and violence, a people with no sense of middle ground or forbearance. Truth and integrity are routinely ignored, rejected or ridiculed, and saying anything to score a few points or attack an opponent. A sense of shared common good and the community of all humankind seem to be concepts lost in our troubled world and culture, and this disease has spread **even to the Church.**

I am deeply troubled by some of the images we see of Christians. I cringe at some of the images of the Church our world sees, **for in our text Jesus severely rebuked the disciples for wanting to rain fire on those who disagree. That same lesson also applies to us,** for this is still the season of God's forgiveness and grace; and trying to call down the fires of judgment and wrath, lashing out in anger or not letting go of resentment **are not how Jesus would have his disciples respond.** I believe, one of the most visible aspects of God's love and grace, is in the granting of opportunity, of more time and space, and not immediately exacting fiery judgment against us. Even as we sin and shamelessly rebel against God and God's truth, God gives us more time to turn back into the light of his love. **God's patience is a precious and subtle aspect of mercy and grace.** God is absolutely infinite in wisdom, power and strength. God could coerce faith, absolute commitment and obedience. God could compel faithful church attendance and service. God could force generous stewardship and giving. God could enforce reconciliation, justice and peace like a mother forcing her children to play together nicely.

God could have made us all perfect little Christian automatons. But instead God chooses to grant us unbelievable freedom. **God places love, life and grace out before us and we can assent, or we can resist and reject.** The power to refuse God's gracious love and blessings is actually an open expression of God's grace and love. **And it is that same freedom that makes it possible for us to love and truly receive Christ for ourselves and for our discipleship to be more than just words.** Faithful Christian discipleship is far more than stubborn righteousness and our effort. **It is when God's grace reigns in our heart, as it redefines and affects how we live and love.**

Psalm 103:1, 8, 22

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.