

Sermon: Looking toward the kingdom of God

Today's gospel is a difficult one. It's confrontational and it doesn't leave much, if any, wiggle room. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." We're either looking toward the kingdom or we are not. We're either responding to the call of life or we're not. We're either open to the coming future or we're not.

Jesus is calling us into question and that's never easy, fun, or comfortable. He is calling into question the direction of our life, the values we claim to hold, and how we are living and embodying those values. He is asking us to look at ourselves rather than the Samaritan on whom we'd like to call down fire from heaven.

By Samaritan I mean those who look, act, and believe differently from us; those who do not hold our religious or political beliefs; those who are not from these parts; those to whom we are opposed and in conflict with, for whatever reasons. And if you're not sure who your Samaritans are look at your social media feed and who posts the articles and comments that push your buttons, turn on the news channel you refuse to watch, picture the face of one you crush and defeat in the arguments that go on in your head.

Today's gospel won't let us turn away from the people and situations that are right in front of us or the future that is coming to us. Jesus recognizes and holds before us the tension in which we live. On the one hand we say to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." On the other hand, we say to him, "But first let me go and" You probably know what that's like. I know I do.

When have you experienced that tension? When has it felt like you were being pulled in two directions, the way of Jesus and some other way? In what ways have you said, "But first let me go and...?"

It's easy and simple to follow Jesus, in principle. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. These are values Jesus holds. That's where Jesus is going. That's the direction in which he has set his face. That's the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good. Most of us probably agree with those values. It's the road we too have chosen to travel, in principle.

But it's so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life than in principle. I suspect we are all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence until we meet the unlovable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch, or the Samaritan in our life. Then it's a different story and that story usually begins with, "But first...."

Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where he is going, who is included, or what he is offering. He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we are from, or what we have done or left undone. Liberal, Conservative, NDP or Green Party, citizen or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, black or white, good or bad, believer or nonbeliever just don't seem to matter to Jesus. For him there is not a why, no conditions attached to love, hospitality, forgiveness, or giving. He does not allow for a "but first" in his life or the lives of his followers.

"But first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional.

Yes, I will love the other but first let me go and see who the other is, whether she or he is deserving of love, whether I like him or her, whether he or she agrees with and is agreeable to me.

Yes, I will open my door to and welcome the stranger but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different he or she is from me, what she or he wants, what I am risking.

Yes, I will forgive another but first let me go and see if she or he has acknowledged her or his wrongdoing, is sorry for what they did, and has promised to change.

Yes, I will give to and care for another but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me.
But first....

It's as if we are backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door. It's as if we are walking backwards into our future, not wanting to see or deal with what is before us. It's as if we have put our hand to the plow and looked back. And we already know what Jesus thinks about that.

I don't want to back my way through this life. I don't want to live, if you will pardon a bad pun, a butt first life. And I hope you don't either. I want us to turn and lead with our hearts, that deep heart that loves the unlovable, forgives the unforgivable, welcomes the stranger, and gives without seeking a payback or even a thank you.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. I wish I could resolve this in some neat and simple way, as much for myself as for you, but I can't. It's not about resolving the gospel. It's about resolving ourselves, resolving our heart. That resolution is not a simple or one time decision. It's a way of being in this world, a way of relating to others, a direction for our life. It's a choice we make every day. It's the road to Jerusalem.

That means looking at the ways in which we are backing through life. It means naming the people and situations to which we have turned our backs, and acknowledging that we do sometimes live a "but first" life.

I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without a "but first?"

I think it would be risky and scary and look pretty crazy. But as I look at the world, read the news, and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So, what if we took a better risk, faced a better fear, and lived a kinder craziness? And what if we were to let that start with you and me, today, in our lives, in our situations, and with whoever or whatever is before us?

What if we were to lead with our hearts and not “but(t) first?”

I wonder: what is really first in our lives? Are we saying to Jesus, “I will follow you,” but adding our qualification, our disclaimer under our breath, perhaps hoping Jesus won’t hear?

God first...but really being successful first, career first, financial well-being first. God first...but really being a good citizen, or being nice and well-liked first. God first...but really comfort and safety and security first.

When God calls you, and you say yes to following Jesus, what are the “buts” that are on the tip of your tongue, or muttered under your breath, or the truth you really mean instead? How do you finish this sentence to Jesus, “I will follow you, but first let me...” what?

Jesus tries to convey to us a sense of urgency. The good news doesn’t have time to wait. The world needs the message of Jesus right now.

We need the message of Jesus, the news about God’s reign on earth, the good news of God’s grace and favor and God’s way that rejects the ways of greed and selfishness and oppression and we need it now. And so, Jesus needs disciples, messengers of the good news right now. People who are ready to say, “But first you God, and then everything else can come next.”

Amen