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Luke 9:51-62

\*ASTERISKS

I begin today's sermon with a song. It's printed in your bulletin where the sermon is listed. We've sung it before but John will play it through once in case it is unfamiliar to you. And then please join me in singing it.

*I have decided to follow Jesus (3 times)  
No turning back, no turning back.*

This song sums up the passage from Luke which is all about the coming rejection of Jesus and what is necessary to follow Jesus. Jesus is heading to Jerusalem where he will face his ultimate rejection and death. But as he journeys there, the writer of Luke gives us a foretaste of the rejection that awaits him. Jesus and his band of disciples pass through a Samaritan town. They hope to find accommodations for themselves to rest for the night, but the Samaritans outright reject them. It helps to remember the animosity that existed in those days between Jews and Samaritans. These two groups of people were ethnically and historically related but had taken divergent paths religiously, especially over where the proper center for true worship was located. Since Jesus was headed to the Jewish center of worship in Jerusalem, it was not surprising that the Samaritans rejected him and his entourage.

The Samaritans' complete rejection of Jesus was certainly upsetting to the disciples, some of whom wanted to torch the village in a fiery display of heavenly judgment. Jesus firmly rebukes them for such an idea.

But Luke then goes on to give us several other examples of those who reject Jesus, not with outright rejection like the Samaritans, but through a kind of half-hearted commitment. They

say they will follow Jesus, but then they offer conditions and qualifiers to their commitment. One says, first let me go bury my father. Another states first let me go say goodbye to the folks at home. A third person pledges to follow Jesus wherever he goes. But when Jesus lays out before him the tough road that discipleship involves, when Jesus tells him, "foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Humanity has nowhere to lay his head," when Jesus makes it clear that following him is by no means a cushy or easy endeavor, we don't hear anything more about this disciple. Presumably he found the calling too daunting.

These individuals effectively say, "I'll follow you Jesus, *but . . .*" and there is some kind of condition that follows. It's like there is a little asterisk next to their name. You're familiar with the asterisk. Whenever we see that little star following a sentence or in advertising, it beckons us to read the fine print where there is more information to be learned than what is being presented. "Buy one get, get one free," the ad states, and you think to yourself, "this is a great deal!" But then you see that little symbol floating just after the sentence like a piece of dandelion fluff. And you read the fine print: "valid with the purchase of an item of \$50 or greater."

When major league baseball player Barry Bonds, who was widely believed to have used performance enhancing drugs, broke legendary Hank Aaron's home run record, many in the baseball world took to using the asterisk after his name as a way to indicate that the record needed to be qualified with the facts of his drug use. The asterisk directs our attention to the important qualifiers and conditions to the claims being presented.

These would-be disciples in our story today need an asterisk after their names because there are conditions and qualifiers that come with their willingness to follow Jesus. Following

Jesus can't be too hard. It can't ask too much. It can't be dangerous. It can't impinge on family obligations or one's busy life. Yes, I will follow Jesus, but . . . Asterisk.

I think about those of us who call ourselves Christians today, who claim to be followers of Jesus, and the asterisks that can be found after our names. We want to follow Jesus. We might even come to church regularly. And yet, our commitments can be tepid and conditional. So much of our modern lives are characterized by divided loyalties and accommodations to the social structures and economic comforts we enjoy. Many who bear the label "Christian" behave as if this identity makes very little dint in their lives at all.

But what we learn from the scriptures is that Jesus' call to discipleship makes *heavy* demands upon us and our lives. Can you think of some of the things Jesus taught that are especially challenging for us? Let's name some of them. I'll start us off. To be a follower of Jesus he tells us we must love our enemies. What other challenging commitments come with being a follower of Jesus? (turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give away your coat, forgive seventy times seven, love your neighbor as yourself, how hard it is for the rich to enter the realm of God, pick up your cross and follow Jesus, the last shall be first and the first shall be last., we must become like children, we must become the servant of others).

The demands of being a follower of Jesus are not easy. Just look at what Jesus says to those individuals in our reading today. What Jesus says to the one who wants to bury his father and to the other who wants to say goodbye to the folks back home seems extreme, and would have been especially shocking to the people in his world who held the family in the highest possible regard. In Jesus' day, taking care of one's parents and fulfilling the obligation to bury one's father was considered a holy and binding responsibility. Were these individuals genuine in their desire to fulfill a family responsibility or were they just offering a delay tactic? It's hard to

know for sure. But what we can learn from this interaction is that Jesus calls his followers to put devotion to God and God's ways above even the best of human commitments. Let's be clear about what this means. Jesus is not denigrating the importance of the family. But families are human institutions. And thus, families are flawed. Families do not always ask the right things from us. Families do not always treat one another justly. Families can hurt and abuse. Think about the Corleone family depicted in *The Godfather*—a mob family that demanded loyalty and devotion to its murderous and criminal endeavors. Think about our ordinary families and the dysfunctions that exist. We are certainly called to love our families and be committed to our families. But as Christians, families do not claim our ultimate commitment or loyalty. That would be idolatry. Jesus calls his followers to put the way of God first. And once freed from our worship of family, or nation, or our careers, or whatever good thing we sometimes offer our blind loyalty to, once freed from the *worship* of these good but human things, we are able to more completely love them and care for them as God intends. God's way takes supreme priority: the way of justice, the way of generosity, the way of forgiveness, the way of kindness, the way of service.

This discipleship thing Jesus calls us into is hard, and challenging, and demanding. We say we will follow Jesus, but our commitments at times come with an asterisk. Love our enemies? Sure, except, not *that* one. Forgive? Sure, but not *this* time. *This* time I am justified in harboring resentment. Be generous? That's a good idea but first let me get that promotion or send my kids to college. Serve others? Yes, Jesus, I will serve others but right now my calendar is just too full. Let me get through this busy season. Yes, Jesus, I will follow your way except if the economy takes a downward turn or the political situation gets tricky, and then I will shelve your way of generosity, justice, compassion, and care for the least of these.

Sometimes the greatest threat to our commitment to Jesus comes not in times of adversity but in times of prosperity. When life is comfortable and the bank account is growing, we can find it hard to remember what commitment to Jesus demands. When life is chugging along smoothly is often when we have bought into the world's values, and Christ's way of service, sacrifice, and self-denial are sometimes the casualties. We accommodate our faith to fit in with the world's ways. Christ calls his disciples, his followers, you and me, to adopt a whole new set of values and to a single-minded commitment to the only way that brings meaningful life.

A single-minded commitment to Jesus' way. That is what is asked of us. But here's the thing. All of us who claim to be Christians have asterisks after our names because we will fail. Our commitments will not always be single-minded. Our loyalties will not always be properly aligned. We will turn back. A lot. We won't and we can't always follow Jesus perfectly. So, yes, yes we deserve the asterisks because our commitments are often qualified.

But that is precisely when Jesus adds a new asterisk next to our name. Right beside your name and mine is a little asterisk, added because of Jesus' life, and death, and resurrection. This new asterisk beckons us to read the fine print: "Tracy: a flawed human being whom God loves, cherishes, forgives, and raises to new life. Would you that aloud with me, adding your own name? That little asterisk added by Jesus is our hope and our salvation. The hope we have in walking Jesus' way of love is found in the fine print.