

6-26-22 Sermon

Luke 9:51-62 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Have you been saved? Have you found Jesus? Have you accepted him as your Lord and savior?

Has anyone ever asked you a question like that?

Maybe you have been asked a similar question: Do you believe in God? Do you go to church? What church do you go to? Oh, what do Lutherans believe?

I don't think anyone has ever asked me this one, though: Do you follow Jesus?

Though we know and lament that numbers are dropping, lots of people still go to church. But this week's gospel made me wonder: Is there a difference between "going to church" and "following Jesus"?

In confirmation a couple of weeks ago we watched a short video about Luther's Small Catechism that hints at that same question.

Christians have been struggling for centuries with how to be Christians - how to follow Jesus. And this video suggests, with a little bit of pointed humor, that it might be easier to just say: Yep. We're Christian. We go to church! And leave it at that. Then this video shows an illustration of two people with crosses on their T-shirts and conversation bubbles over their heads: We're totally Christians. No questions, please!

That simplifies things, the video says. But following Jesus is more involved than that! And, as Jesus tells us today, it's costlier than that.

Today's scripture readings challenge us to take a closer look at following Jesus: What it's not. What it is. And why - when we know those things - why we would follow Jesus at all.

Right away in the gospel, we get an example of what following Jesus is not. It is not practicing vengeance on his behalf. A Samaritan village fails to welcome Jesus, and James and John won't stand for that.

The icy reception shouldn't have been a surprise. Despite shared ancestry, Jews and Samaritans had a tense relationship going back centuries.

But James and John are ready to wipe out the whole village over a failure to provide hospitality. And Jesus won't stand for that.

He rebukes the two disciples, and they move on to another village. Because following Jesus isn't about vengeance.

And it's not about reveling in God's grace and forgiveness to the extent that we do whatever we want. That's Paul's reminder for the Galatian followers of Jesus and for us.

In Jesus we are freed from any notion that we need to justify ourselves by our good works. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we are made right with God. We are free. But how we use our freedom matters. When we use that freedom to serve ourselves, our freedom often costs our neighbors and our communities.

If we all use our freedom to indulge our own selfish desires, we will end up devouring one another. I wonder what Paul would have to say about the ways we are devouring one another today. We see people seeking vengeance against others who don't think or vote or live or love or believe as they do. We see people hurling hateful words at one another, whether in person or online, often because of competing desires to indulge in our freedoms.

Paul uses words from the Old Testament to suggest how followers of Jesus ought to use their freedom. They are words Jesus commends to the disciples in the next chapter of Luke, as Jesus prepares to tell a parable - about a Samaritan. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

As followers of Jesus we are free to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we are truly loving our neighbors, setting aside our personal preferences and motives, and truly seeking our neighbors' well-being and flourishing, then we don't have to get wound up in arguments about whether our actions align with God's laws. Because loving our neighbors is the summation of God's laws.

We are freed to love neighbors who are different from us. Neighbors with whom we disagree. Neighbors who have egged us on by using their freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. Neighbors who have failed to show us hospitality.

Are you imagining some of those neighbors right now? Does loving them seem next to impossible? Does them loving you seem next to impossible?

I think it's possible. But I don't think it's easy. And Jesus doesn't tell us that following him will be easy.

In fact, he pretty much says the opposite. Following Jesus is costly.

Following Jesus will interfere with our desires to control our lives and our schedules. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Following Jesus will take us out of our comfort zones, out of our comfortable church buildings, out of our comfortable neighborhoods, into uncomfortable situations and uncomfortable conversations.

And following Jesus is urgent. Jesus has harsh words for those who seek to follow him but prefer to wait for more convenient timing – even though their excuses seem totally legitimate to me. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I don't know about you, but I cannot count the number of times I have come up with an excuse for not following Jesus. Or tried to justify myself for following him only up to the edges of my comfort zone. And those excuses have ranged from the seemingly monumental (what if the church sends me somewhere far from family) to the undeniably petty (but I don't like parking downtown).

Yet Jesus calls his would-be followers to prioritize proclaiming God's reign above everything!

Why would anyone do that? When we take an honest look at what following Jesus is – and is not – why would we choose to follow? Or ... why would we follow Jesus when we can just go to church?

I think Paul gives us a pretty hopeful reason.

As we grow as followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit is at work in us. The Spirit is transforming us into people whose lives produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And the Spirit is transforming those around us to produce that same fruit. So as followers of Jesus we not only bear good fruit, we receive the abundance of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control that is growing up all around us.

And through the power of the Holy Spirit, might that be fruit enough to sustain us - and even delight us - as we follow Jesus wherever he goes.