

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2022C 2

We all have our own excuses for not following through on our good intentions, not living up to the challenge of discipleship. The three would-be followers Jesus encounters in this week's Gospel text were great at manufacturing excuses that would allow them to gracefully bow out of discipleship when it got too demanding or uncomfortable. Jesus responds with a no-nonsense, no-excuses mandate, separating those who would follow from those who could only hesitate and calculate the cost of their commitment.

The naive, thoughtless pledge of the first of these three potential disciples sounds as though he were actually committed to joining Jesus. But Jesus' response lays out the truth about his identity and mission, and makes it clear how demanding a personal commitment to this path would be.

The young man claims he will follow Jesus "anywhere," but the truth is that Jesus only has "nowhere." Being a disciple will not give this man security of place, profession and person - it will in fact strip him of all the common forms of security we find so dear.

No home, no office, no pension plan, no health-care plan, no home-owners insurance, comes along with the credentials of discipleship. When Jesus clarifies the transient, vagrant

nature of following heaven's highway, he is challenging all of us to move beyond the accepted standards of safety, beyond our preoccupation with job security, financial security, social security and invested securities. The only true security in life is through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which gives us true freedom - freedom to love Jesus and to love the neighbor.

Jesus dashes the dreams of his first inquirer for a secure place in Jesus' ministry by pointing out that the whole strength of his mission is built on the apparently shifting sands of insecurity. But Jesus realizes that for disciples to be moved by the Spirit with complete freedom, they must not be too deeply rooted in their own lives and selves. One cannot have total security on earth and enjoy freedom in the Spirit.

The second person in this text receives a personal invitation from Jesus to follow him. But, not unlike us, this individual claims family responsibilities tie him down and hold him back. According to Jewish tradition it was the duty of the eldest surviving son to see to the burial of his parents. It may not even be the case, therefore, that this potential disciple's father is yet dead. The request could be for a grace period of an undefined amount of time, until this man's father grows old or ill and dies.

Who among us doesn't feel the daily schizophrenic tug at our psyches as we try to balance the demands of family with

the demands of our jobs, our creditors, our community? We all have mortgages or rents due, car payments, kids that outgrow shoes three times a year, college tuition, ailing elderly parents and grocery bills that grow at an inversely proportional rate to the number of bags it takes to get the groceries home.

But Jesus denies that we can claim our families as some sort of discipleship-exemption loophole. There is no validity in claiming "bad timing" as our excuse for turning a deaf ear to God's call. Indeed, trusting in God's love and grace and plunging into the responsibilities of discipleship will only result in making us more capable of dealing with family crises that come our way. The road of discipleship is not littered with dumpsites for our family responsibilities, but rather punctuated with pit stops to refresh us and renew our love and commitment to those who depend on us.

The final inquirer after discipleship also dredges up his family as an excuse to buy time before taking any decisive action. In the case of this man, however, the excuse is far more cosmetic. He wants to be socially acceptable and courteously correct about this whole undertaking. After all, what would happen to his reputation, his social standing, if he simply walked away from his former life in order to follow Jesus? His anxiety is over what others might think about him and his first loyalty is to maintain decorum and proper obeisance to the past - not excitement and anticipation about serving Jesus.

Jesus challenges this reluctant disciple to move beyond easy conformities, accepted conventionalities, risk-free familiarities, and to dare to do something for God. The image of the plow Jesus uses is a moving image. A field does not get plowed by turning it over in your mind. You must walk along, always moving forward in order to prepare the ground. Jesus does not leave us where he finds us. Discipleship is not a static state. Rather than fretting over what may be socially or politically correct, Jesus gives us a new reference point for life - freedom in God's Spirit to truly love and serve each other.

Luke's trilogy of discipleship drop-outs is hardly unique. The Bible is filled with people with piles of alibis - people who came up with all sorts of creative excuses for not serving God. But in the eyes of God, those who excuse themselves actually accuse themselves, for they are arguing only with their own weaknesses and worries. Consider Elijah who said, "Excuse me, Lord, but my nerves can't take it!" Or Isaiah who said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm not pious or pure enough." Jeremiah balked and said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm too young." And perhaps the most prolific excuse-maker of all, Moses, said, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm too old - and besides I've earned my retirement." When the Lord shot down that excuse, Moses came back with, "Excuse me, Lord, but I'm not good at public speaking." When that failed to convince the Lord, Moses finally trotted out the

old, "Excuse me, Lord, but there are others much more qualified."

It is clear then that our excuses for not following through on our good intentions, not living up to the challenge of discipleship will not be accepted by God. Therefore we must ask ourselves these questions: Is God calling me to follow a special avenue of discipleship? Is there some venue of service staring me in the face, meriting my attention, but receiving only my excuses? When I hear the voice of Jesus calling, will my response be "Excuse me, Lord" or will I spring up like the boy Samuel and eagerly proclaim, "Here I am, Lord"?