



**“I’m Ready to Follow You, Lord; but First...”**

**Scripture – Luke 9:51-62**

**Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, June 26, 2016**

Can you think of an incident that served as a turning point in your life? Something happened or someone spoke words that had such a profound impact that you altered your course. It might have been a tragic event, a captivating teacher, a scripture passage, flunking a class, a great book, a spiritual retreat. If you take the time, you can conjure up several distinct markers that redrew the roadmap of your life.

Today’s passage from the Gospel of Luke marks a pivotal point in the ministry of Jesus. Up to now, Jesus has been traveling through Galilee – the green rolling hills in the northern part of ancient Israel. Trekking from village to village, his ministry of healing and his penetrating parables have attracted a growing entourage. Jesus has been stacking success upon success when something triggers a change of course.

The gospel writers say that Jesus had a mystical experience in which he encountered Moses and Elijah, two illustrious, but long-dead prophets. The encounter was a lightning bolt for Jesus that convinced him to head in a new direction. Today’s text tells us that Jesus firmly resolved to set his course for Jerusalem. Our New Revised Standard Version translates the Greek literally when it says, “He *set his face* to go to Jerusalem” where he must confront the religious leaders who are in collusion with the occupying army.

The words evoke an image of someone who has firmly resolved to take a specific course of action and nothing will deter him. Then, as if to foreshadow what he will encounter when he reaches Jerusalem, the people of the next village reject him. Jesus and his band of followers need a place to stay for the night, so Jesus sends a few messengers ahead to scout out prospects in the next village. It happens to be a community of Samaritans.

Jews and Samaritans had a long-running feud and often treated one another with contempt. True to form, when the scouts inquire about a place to stay for the night, the Samaritans drive a stake into the ground – “No Vacancy!”

Everyone walking with Jesus was surely disappointed. They were tired, they were hungry, and they needed a place to stay for the night, but the Samaritans said, “Keep moving!” James and John, two of Jesus’ most faithful disciples, became infuriated. No one was going to treat their master with such indignity. They said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

Their words ignite a blaze within Jesus. Rather than being outraged by the snub of the Samaritans, Jesus is exasperated with James and John. He rebukes them for such a suggestion. “You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.”

Have they learned nothing from him? Jesus could not have been more straightforward when he said, “Do good to those who hate you...pray for those who abuse you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

When we make the commitment to become a follower of Jesus, we sign up for a great adventure. We declare that we want more than a surface level of existence. We want to take the plunge into the depths of life where we form devoted relationships and give ourselves to noble causes. However, adventures are not always a breeze. Adventures include rugged terrain and formidable challenges.

In our passage, Jesus drives home the point of how demanding it can be to follow him. Three would-be followers approach Jesus and declare that they desire to join his ranks. The first one says, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

Jesus replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, are you ready to risk your security? Are you ready to step into an unknown future? That is what is required to embark on an adventure.

A second potential follower is ready to commit to Jesus, but says, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” We can all agree that is a reasonable request, but the response of Jesus is shocking: “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The duty on burying the dead was binding on all devout Jews. “Honor your father and mother” was one of the big ten. Was Jesus demanding that this man reject this time-honored responsibility?

As is often his style, Jesus uses hyperbole to drive home his message. He is saying to this would-be follower: Do not miss what is most important. Make God first in your life.

A third follower approaches Jesus saying, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home.”

Jesus replies, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Again, Jesus uses hyperbole to deliver a striking message. Once you commit to following Jesus, do not keep glancing back over your shoulder. If you put too much stock in lesser commitments, you will veer off course. Like a farmer plowing a field, you must keep focused and moving forward. God wants our lives to be an adventure, but for that to happen, we must be all in. There are countless distractions and interruptions that can drag us off track. God wants us to commit our intelligence and our energy and our resources to following Jesus.

Over the past few weeks, there have been commencement exercises across the country as high school and college seniors received their diplomas. The speakers at the college ceremonies are generally recognizable names. They have been chosen because they have been outstanding in their field and they are expected to share a few nuggets of what made them successful.

Last month, Samantha Power, the US Ambassador to the UN, spoke at Yale, her alma mater. She told the graduates that her freshman year was a flop; but as the year ended, two lightning bolts hit her.

The first was from the professor of her modern Irish literature class. Since she had lived in Ireland until she was nine and had already read most of the books on the required reading list, she figured she could coast through the class. But, at the end of the semester, on her final paper, she found a long handwritten note on the last page. The note tore into her for not making a serious effort and questioned why she had fought for a seat in a class where she did not care to do the work. He wrote that it was disrespectful to the other students, the literature, and most of all to herself.

She stomped into the professor's office, held up the note and said, "This is harsh." He shot back, "You deserved it." It stung, and she wanted to protest, but inside she knew he was right. In fact, the judgment could have been made not only about that particular class, but her entire freshman year. She had not put her heart into it.

She returned to her home town of Atlanta for the summer and a few weeks later the second lightning bolt struck. She had a summer internship with the local CBS affiliate and was sitting in a video booth taking notes on a Braves baseball game when a live feed came on the screen. It was from Tiananmen Square in China where students her age were calling on their government to grant them fundamental freedoms. She was frozen as she watched the tanks roll into the square and then saw soldiers opening fire on the students. Watching those students risking their lives for freedom drove home to her just how little she had put on the line at school.

It called to something deep within her. At that moment she knew she wanted to be totally committed to something noble. She wanted to do whatever she could to help people who are fighting for their dignity and their basic human rights. She said, "While I did not yet know what that meant, or how I was going to do it, or whether I could do it, my compass had been reset. So when the iconic photo of the man standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, I tore it out and put it up in my dorm room as a reminder of what it meant to make a real commitment and to take real risks."<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes God summons people to a specific profession – doctor, nurse, counselor, teacher, lawyer, social worker. Sometimes God's call is to the volunteer work we do. God challenges us to devote our energy to projects that will enhance the well-being of others – combating racism, mentoring a child, visiting people who are ill or lonely, finding cures for diseases, curbing violence in our cities, providing programs for people with addictions, welcoming refugees, feeding hungry people – there are countless possibilities. None of us are called to throw ourselves into every problem we face. Rather, out of the unique circumstances of our lives, God calls us to particular projects. The challenge for each of us is to figure out which specific concerns God is calling us to engage and then commit ourselves to doing whatever we can.

Can you commit to the unique adventure God wants you to live? God is looking for people who will dedicate themselves to following Jesus wherever that path may take them. God wants us to discover that loving God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves will generate purpose and joy and satisfaction. Watching baseball just is not enough.

If your commitment to Jesus is tepid, sweep away the diversions and change your priorities because God wants your adventure to be everything it can be.

If you are in doubt about what next steps you should take, pray that God will make it clear to you. If that doesn't work, spend time investigating possibilities. If that fails – call me!

## NOTES

1. Ambassador Samantha Power, "Get Close," Yale commencement speech, May 22, 2016.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ SUDIE NIESEN THOMPSON

Open our eyes, O loving and compassionate Jesus, that we may behold you. Help us to see you walking beside us as we wander life's dark valleys or meander beside quiet streams. Help us to see you before us, guiding our footsteps and leading us in right paths. Help us to see you at work in our homes and our communities, in familiar neighborhoods and in foreign lands, in sacred spaces and in the places we least expect to meet you.

Help us to see you, compassionate Christ, for you are there ... before us and beside us, in all that is beautiful and all that is broken ... you are there. Draw us close, O God, that we might know your presence and take comfort in your loving embrace.

Open our eyes, O loving and compassionate Jesus, that we may see to follow you. We give thanks that you claim us in the waters of baptism, nourish us at your table, transform us by your Word, and equip us for service. Help us, Lord, to be faithful disciples ... who hear your call and respond with thanksgiving.

There is so much that holds us back from following you with our hearts, souls, minds, and strength ... We are weary, we are anxious, we are indifferent, we are full of doubt and empty of hope. We struggle to believe your good news in a world that is bent on destruction, where fear runs rampant and hatred goes unchecked. We cannot fathom your abundant grace in a world where compassion seems scarce.

But you, O God, offer us abundant life – a life free from fear and full of hope, a life marked by generosity and joy. So open our eyes, O God, to the fullness of life with you. Help us to hear your call and stir our hearts to respond, that we might bear witness to your love and grace in all we do. Give us courage to proclaim the kingdom of God in word and in deed, that – through us – all people may know life abundant.

We pray in the name of the one who calls us to follow, the one who taught us how to pray: **Our Father ....**