

“Know your purpose”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Luke 9:51-62

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Sometimes I just don't understand Jesus. First, people reject him, and he's totally chill about it. Then, people beg to follow him and learn the truth, and suddenly, he's Jack Nicholson shouting, “You can't handle the truth!”

Certainly doesn't seem to be a top strategy for church growth. You usually want to be nice to your newcomers, encourage them, not shout at them when their loved ones have died. That's like the first thing they teach you in seminary: do not be mean to people whose loved ones have died.

I mean the poor guy just wanted to bury his father. The other guy just wanted to kiss his family and tell them where he was going. How could Jesus be so gracious to the Samaritans, who flat out reject him—how could he offer them not a single ill word—and yet turn around and be so harsh and demanding to these three people who say they want to follow him?

If there's an answer anywhere, it's got to be in the text itself, so let's take a closer look.

First, Jesus decides to go through a Samaritan village. This was a dangerous path for a Jew to take. Jews and Samaritans didn't get along—not completely different from the conflict today between Israel and Palestine. A lot of bad blood there. Yet, Jesus goes there, because his message of love and grace is for everyone. Except... they reject him! Not because he's the Son of God, not because they disagree with his teachings, but because he's a Jew, because “his face was set toward Jerusalem,” meaning away from Mount Gerazim, where the Samaritans had their own temple.

James and John are furious. They didn't want to go into Samaria in the first place; they don't like those people. They only went because Jesus asked them to, and now they've spurned Jesus—the one guy who was trying to bridge the conflict. So they propose to rain down fire from heaven and destroy the village. Might seem like a bit of an overreaction. But remember these are people who have been fighting for centuries. They remember the prophet Elijah calling down heavenly fire on Samaritans and another time on the prophets of Baal.

Jesus, however, rebukes them. He's not here to destroy lives; he's here to save them. He will not have his mission of grace derailed by a desire for vengeance. He's already told them that if someone rejects them, shake the dust from their sandals and move on; the mission must continue.

Later that day, the mission has three possible new recruits—people who say they're willing to follow Jesus. Jesus, however, seems to sense that they're not ready to commit.

Jesus responds to the first guy by explaining that he, Jesus, is basically homeless. He walks a hard, persecuted path. That's what happens when you challenge the status quo, preach love for everyone, and call out the world's hypocrisies and injustices. If this guy thinks that he can follow Jesus but still have other parts of his life that are comfortable and safe, he's barking up the wrong tree.

The second and third guys both have family obligations. They tell Jesus, "Not now, but tomorrow." To us, Jesus' response seems callous and unreasonable. But maybe Jesus senses something we know well from our own lives: when we make promises "not now, but tomorrow," like I do with my exercise regimen or the hole in our ceiling, tomorrow often doesn't come. We just find another excuse.

I don't think Jesus is condemning funerals or family conversations. After all, Jesus weeps for Lazarus when he dies, and there's no condemnation of the burial for John the Baptist or of the disciples who tend to Jesus when he dies. Funerals were and are a central part of a life with Jesus. So are honoring one's family responsibilities. The problem isn't in what they propose; it's in the fact that they perceive these family acts as separate from their discipleship.

They still don't get it. None of them do, not James and John, not these would-be disciples. They think that they can carve up their lives like a slab of meat, give a portion to Jesus, another portion to family and career, another to comfort, another to anger or hate. They can give give Jesus Sunday, but they're going to keep the other six days to themselves. They can preach love, but they're still going to curse the guy who cuts them off in traffic. They can work for justice, but that's not going to affect the things they buy or the racist jokes told by their friends or the compromises they make at work. They can worship God, but that doesn't mean they won't sometimes also worship money or relaxation or work.

Every time in this story Jesus refuses to accept this kind of compartmentalization. He is single-minded in his purpose. Now that might sound odd. Single-mindedness is not often thought of as a positive trait. My son Emerson can be single-minded when he goes after that thing I've told him ten times to leave alone, or when he asks me to read the same book for the twentieth time. But Jesus is on a mission, and that mission takes him to the cross. And there's no way he's going to make it to the cross, to that impossible sacrifice of love, unless he's all in, every bit of him.

Jesus is on a mission to proclaim God's love once and for all, to rescue humanity from anything that would separate it from God, to rescue humanity from death itself. His purpose is love. And he can't half-love somebody; he can't half-sacrifice; he can't speak truth only some of the time; he can't pick and choose whom he loves and when, taking breaks for judgment and hate, or comfort and convenience. It's all or nothing. That's how this love thing works.

Jesus has a singularly clear sense of his purpose in life. Do we? Or are we still hedging our bets, putting some of our money down on Jesus, on love, justice, the gospel, but just to be safe, also on these other options.

To say that our purpose is to follow Christ, to proclaim his love and good news, doesn't mean that we don't get to have our funerals, or our families, or our jobs, or our vacations. It means that we do them, always, in the spirit of our singular purpose.

For instance, what if the second guy hadn't contrasted following Jesus and burying his father, but had said that he would follow Jesus *by* returning to commend his father to God and proclaim the good news of his salvation? What if the other had said instead, "Let me follow you by returning to my family, sharing your love with them, and together living in such a way that proclaims the kingdom of God"?

What if that hike you enjoy became a conscious practice of worship and prayer? What if your family and work became a means by which you speak God's love? What if everything you did were an expression of this singular purpose: to go and proclaim the kingdom of God?

Of course, we're not Jesus. No matter how hard we try, we will fall short. We will fail to keep our promises. We will choose comfort over sacrifice. We will yield to anger and judgment. We will live parts of our lives in ways inconsistent with the gospel. I do, every day.

That's where grace comes into this story. The Samaritans fail. The disciples fail. These three newcomers fail. But not one of them, in all their imperfection, is able to stop Jesus from pursuing his mission. No hellfire is called down. Quite the opposite: Jesus goes on to offer up his life for us, even those Samaritans, even those would-be disciples. He just keeps on loving them, keeps on working for their freedom and salvation, all the way up to the cross and to the stone rolled away, because that's his purpose, and whether we are or not, he's all in.

Rather than just letting us off the hook, what that grace reveals is how this whole walking-with-Jesus thing works. First, Jesus calls us. We experience a love, a purpose, like we've never known before. Some of you have experienced that right here at Westminster, or can remember the first time you tasted God's presence in your life. It was electric. And so we commit. We say, Yes, I want that! But as time goes on, we come to find that this is pretty hard; Jesus is asking a lot of us. We slip up. Sometimes in a big way. But Jesus just keeps walking right along, offering us more of that grace, more of that love, that purpose. Forgiven and renewed, we recommit. And it gets hard again; Jesus asks a lot of us, again. We slip up, again. And back to the grace. Back to the calling. Back to commitment. And on it goes. But through it all, we move forward, because Jesus is moving forward, because nothing's stopping that love. He knows his purpose. And if we but follow, we'll find ours too. **Amen.**