

Psalm 77:11-20  
Luke 9:51-62

“Responding to Harsh Demands” R.P.C.  
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Someday I'll preach a series of sermons entitled “Difficult Moments with Jesus” or something like that.... Why you ask? Because I've been working on sermons for over 35 years and I can tell you, this episode in Luke, chapter 9, when Jesus speaks of ‘the tough cost of discipleship,’ is not all that unusual. Just imagine, he speaks these harsh, demanding words to people like us who dare to come here to listen to him on a regular basis – even on a pleasant summer Sunday morning in June!

I'm supposed to be a preacher, so I have learned that anybody preaching Jesus has got to use some personal discretion. No preacher ever got hurt, or criticized or “fired” for quoting Jesus on the passage, “consider the lilies of the field,” or “welcome the children unto me.” But... there are other words of Jesus, when spoken to a complacent summertime congregation, that feel like a rock being fired from a sling-shot.

So we preacher-types have learned to sugar-coat the harsher more demanding words of Jesus presented as gospel. After all, we are desperate to get a hearing, and not have our hearers run away – especially on these summer Sundays when the seats and pews are already so empty. Yet sometimes in our efforts to make the gospel more palatable, easier to swallow, we preachers turn away from the “Lord of the Demanding, Harsh Word” as Jesus could sometimes rightfully be titled.

A major U.S. church denomination recently launched a grand media campaign called, “Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors.” The campaign has been somewhat successful, drawing more people back to church. When the TV spots for this campaign were revealed to a major conference a few years ago, they were met with widespread acclaim and even applause. But one layperson stood up and said, “These spots are all very attractive TV ads, but I noticed they never mentioned Jesus.” The marketing/media consultant replied, “That is because our research has shown us that the word ‘Jesus’ is a turnoff for many in our target audience.”

Ah, I see ... so we had better stick with the sweet, sentimental and glitzy to avoid anyone or anything as controversial as ... as Jesus, and his words.

b. After all, Jesus' words may be ‘the words of life’, but they are too tough for nine out of ten average self-centered North Americans.

It reminds me of that preaching class I took nearly 40 years ago. The professor told us as students, “Choose your words carefully, especially the opening words of your sermons.” “This is when you want to win a hearing from your congregation.” “This is when you want to hook them for the rest of the sermon.” Some smart-aleck sitting at the back said, “But didn’t Jesus begin his most famous sermon in Luke with, ‘Blessed are you poor, God’s kingdom is yours ... woe to you who are rich, you’ve had your reward?’”

Well yes, of course... but the reality is that if we want the congregation to engage with us and continue listening, then it is better for we preachers to preach sweet grace and easy peace; don’t forget to mention the “prosperity gospel.” Rather than castigate the rich, we need to coddle the rich because they are the ones who support the programs financially and contribute to building campaigns. So what if we have to neglect the poor, the widows, the youth and the children a bit – they don’t carry the freight of the church anyway.

In this Sunday’s gospel lesson, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and we all know full-well where that leads him.... Someone comes up to Jesus and says, “I’ll follow you, but first let me go bury my father. After all, doesn’t one of the Ten Commandments tell us to honor our mothers and fathers?” Jesus responds, “Let the dead bury the dead; come with me and preach the kingdom!” Another person says, “I’ll follow you, but just let me say goodbye to my dear family. After all, don’t we believe in family values?” Jesus says that no one who trifles with such mundane matters ought not to try to be his disciple.

Boy! Talk about some harsh words! No wonder so many like the rich young man went away ... maybe ran away!

And yet, and yet you are here this morning as those who, despite all the good reasons for turning away, have turned in the other direction to follow.

a. Many over the course of time have turned away, but you have gathered here, having turned toward him. Despite the harsh, grueling, demanding words, you have said, “Here I Am.”

So, did Luke record these tough words of Jesus in order to judge us or encourage us? Many, Luke reminds us, upon hearing the tough words of Jesus, turned away from him, and refused to follow. Yet, we, for all of our faults and shortcomings, have turned toward Jesus. And here we are again, this morning attempting to follow him.

A chaplain was leading a Bible study on the campus of a major university, and toward the end of their nine week study of the Gospel of Luke, a student was lamenting the scarcity of identifiable Christians on campus. “Sometimes it gets lonely trying to be a disciple,” she said.

Another student responded, “Well, this is my first intense Bible study, so this is the first time I’ve gotten into what Jesus actually said and didn’t say.” “All I can say is that it’s a miracle that you can get anybody to follow a guy who talks like this!”

Yet, even though many of you have studied the scriptures and know a lot about the Bible and have heard Jesus’ teachings and words, there you are still saying, “Here am I, Lord!” Why? Frankly, I’m not sure. I’m sure that the reasons you are here this morning are many and varied. Perhaps the amazing thing is that there are so many who, even after hearing Jesus preach, are still present and accounted for!

Within the first few lines of our text for today, we are told concerning Jesus, “His face was set toward Jerusalem.” Now that is quite an evocative phrase, for it tells us clearly that Jesus refuses to walk away from the fight of his life; it tells us of his obedient resolve.

Today Christianity is often presented (or misrepresented?) as a good deal – as a technique for helping make essentially self-satisfied people even more self-satisfied. So it is good to be reminded here on a summer Sunday that Jesus did not present the Gospel that way.

We can never accuse Jesus of false-advertising. When he said, “Follow me!” he also was quite upfront about the peculiar dangers and demands of following his narrow way in obedience to God. Here, in Luke, chapter 9, Jesus lays out in no uncertain terms the sometimes harsh cost of discipleship. So will we now walk with him toward Jerusalem, following the way of self-sacrificial love, rather than our way of pleasure and success? That’s the question before the church on this pleasant summer Sunday - just as it is a question on every Sunday, and every day of our faithful following.

With a degree of confidence I can say that Christians are not especially naïve people. If we have been around the block more than once – which most of us have – then we know the lie behind those easy words: don’t worry; be happy; no sweat; you deserve that. We all know the hidden dangers of believing the line of “buy this and you will feel so much better.” Or, “using this simple technique or using this product, or this time-saving gadget will change your life forever.” Or, “piling enough stuff together in one place and you will feel secure. We all know

the falsehood hidden in such statements. Perhaps that makes us able to respond positively even to a hard, demanding word – if the word is the truth.

Baptist theologian James McClendon said that when he was twelve his mother told him, “It’s time for you to make your profession of faith and be baptized.” McClendon replied, “But Mama, I don’t feel I want to be baptized.” She said, “I don’t care what you feel.” “You just go tell the preacher that you have accepted Jesus and you want to be baptized.” Not one to cross his Mama, he went.

His Baptist preacher said, “So you want to be a Christian?” McClendon slowly nodded yes. “Well, you know that if you are baptized it means that you promise to listen to Jesus and to do whatever he tells you,” said the preacher. Then he continued, “Why he might even tell you to go to Africa and preach the Gospel to cannibals.” “He might tell you to get on a boat and go to China to tell about Jesus.” “You know, don’t you, that we have had two hundred Baptist missionaries killed in China. Jesus might call you to go there!”

McClendon said that either the pastor didn’t know anything about the perverted mind of a twelve-year-old male, or he well-knew everything about the perverted mind of a twelve-year-old, but McClendon’s reply was, “This is great! Where do I sign up?” “I didn’t know being a Christian could be so much fun!”

So maybe some of you are hiding a bit of a secret. Maybe some of you are also dying to hear some harsh, demanding, disruptive words. Maybe when you too hear a really tough, adventuresome word, you too respond, not with the normal, “I can’t do that!” But rather with a hardy, “Here I am, send me!”

You have likely heard of the program called Teach America. It’s that national program aimed at colleges and universities where they attempt to recruit students who are soon to graduate, to become teachers in some of the most difficult communities and schools in the nation.

A curious professor wanted to see what all the fuss was all about concerning this program, so she attended one of their recruitment meetings on a university campus one evening. She got to the auditorium where about 200 students had gathered.

The recruiter stood up, looked out at the gathered crowd and said, “I don’t know why I am here tonight. I can look out and see that I am at a first-class university.” “I know that this is a BMW type of school.” “You are all smart or you wouldn’t have been admitted here; so I expect you are all ambitious too.” “You can go on from here and get jobs on Wall Street, in medicine, in government and industry.” “And here I am trying to talk you into throwing away some of the best

years of your life teaching in some of the worst schools in the country for a mere \$20,000 a year.”

“We had two of our teachers beaten near death last year in their classrooms.”  
“And I can tell that none of you are interested in that. So I won’t keep you. But if by chance any of you think you are up for this, I’ve got these brochures and your can come up here and get one.... Meeting’s over.”

With that those students jumped up and, pushing and shoving one another, mobbed the front and began fighting over those brochures. The professor thought, “That recruiter’s good!”

Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He is no passive victim of state-sponsored violence. He is no automaton or robot, trudging his way toward his fate. He has resolutely decided to go to Jerusalem. And we all know what going to Jerusalem means for Jesus – He is going to his certain death. He didn’t have to go; he resolutely decides to go.

Those of us who live in a “culture of victimization” as some have called it, need to take note. Jesus is not simply a victim of evil and violence; he is the strong warrior marching resolutely to engage the enemy. Thus he is portrayed in Luke, not as a victim, but rather as potential victor. Now Jesus is going to take charge.

Likewise when Christians preach nonviolence as a way of life, when we practice peacemaking, we do so not as helpless doormats for the jackboots of the world. We do so as a means of subverting the world, as a means of participating in the victory of Jesus.

So we gather here this morning to worship Jesus, to celebrate ‘God with US’ in all of God’s demanding truthfulness. We have gathered here to listen to his harsh, demanding words, and not flinch at his call. It takes a willingness to risk, you know; it takes resolve. It takes a trust in God’s power to redeem, succeed and to save. So even if a program like Family Promise, seems demanding – bring it on!

For we have gathered to celebrate that despite the demands – despite all the easier things we could be doing with our lives, we have thrown caution to the wind to follow the call of Jesus. Thus, by the grace of God, we are enabled to follow the sometimes difficult, hard words in obedience. By the grace of God, we too can answer, “Here I am, Lord, send me!” Amen.