

“Sleeping in Foxholes, Retreating to Cemeteries”

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Texts: 1 Samuel 12:13-15
Matthew 8:18-22

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This morning's Gospel Gem may not seem like a gem at all. These are words of Jesus that nobody remembers fondly!

Imagine you are on the church welcoming committee – you take your turn once per month to stand at the door and greet people as they are entering worship. Most of the people you see you know – if not by name, then at least you recognize their face. But on this particular Sunday, there's a guest...it's his second Sunday he tells you. “Oh great,” you say, “welcome back!”

This guy is really complimentary of the church and then puts right out there, “I want to follow Jesus wherever he leads me.” You don't hear that often as a greeter. You pause for a second...how should I respond? Let me give you some pastoral advice – whatever you do – don't answer like Jesus! Say something encouraging, like, “Praise the Lord! We are so happy...and East Union is a great place to follow Jesus...” or something similar.

In today's passage, of course, a certain eager scribe, approaches Jesus and says, ‘Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go.’ On the surface, it seems a remarkable commitment. This is no ordinary scribe, given there was constant conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. The scribes pretty much opposed Jesus at every turn...with great hostility, even to the point of plotting to kill Him. But this scribe is very different.

You'd think Jesus would be welcoming, but not even close. It's like Jesus is suddenly pouring cold water on the head of this scribe. He says to him, ‘Before you get too excited about being My disciple, let me first tell you something. You know the foxes? Well, they have holes. You see the birds of the air? They have nests in the trees. But the Son of Man, that's Me, has nowhere to lay His head.’ In other words, Jesus kind of questions the scribe...or challenges him. He basically says, ‘Before you say that you want to follow Me everywhere, you'd better consider first what is involved in being My disciple...there is sacrifice, hardship, singular dedication to God's love...and a whole lot more.’

Following Jesus, then and now, is not an emotional decision made once in the heat of the moment, but rather a walk of life...a series of many decisions made throughout the day, the week, a season, decisions to seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

What does it mean to follow Jesus, The Son of Man, who has nowhere to lay His head? What was Jesus saying to the scribe? He wasn't talking about resting – but rather about relationship to the world. Jesus was not of this world – but of God. He wanted the scribe to understand that following Him, meant coming to grips with this idea that Jesus' disciples are in the world, but not of it...that we follow different standards of allegiance and ownership.

The Bible imagines the world, not as the mountains and rivers, trees and birds, but rather as a kind of system, a man-made system which is alienated from God and does not acknowledge God. Jesus is telling the scribe not to cultivate friendship with this world.

So, the First Letter of John in the New Testament can say, “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” The values of the world are just not compatible with the values of the kingdom of God. “I will follow you wherever you go,” said the scribe. Jesus was a little skeptical, figured the scribe really didn't know what he was saying and Jesus didn't want to reinforce his naivete...but still, Jesus comes across a bit rudely.

But maybe not so rudely, when compared to the next example! There is this disciple, who seems to have every intention of following Jesus, but first needs to attend to the important family duty of burying his father. Anyone with any compassion or sensitivity would say, "Sure, by all means, take as much time as you need for grieving and practical matters, and when things settle down, you can join back up with our ministry team." But not Jesus. Jesus says in no uncertain terms...No! 'Leave the dead to bury the dead. As for you, come and follow Me.'

Why would Jesus want to prevent this man from honoring his parents by taking time to bury his father? Jesus severely rebukes the Pharisees for not honoring their father and their mother. Jesus perhaps perceived there was more to the man's request than simple family obligation.

It seems probable that the disciple's father had not actually died yet. If there had been such a close death in his family, it's unlikely the disciple would have been with Jesus. He would have been at home with the mourners because the practice was to bury as soon as possible, within twenty-four hours after death if at all possible.

Jesus may have sensed that the disciple was asking for permission to remain at home until his father's death and burial, and then follow at a later time. The problem with this request is that the responsibilities of the kingdom are being put off until another time. And who knows when that 'better time' will be...if it ever comes.

How much are you like the scribe and the disciple? How often we find ourselves sleeping in foxholes and retreating to cemeteries – thereby avoiding the demands of the Gospel. We say we are followers of Jesus, but...

... here are other things that are "first" in our life.

... We say we will follow Jesus wherever he leads, but
maybe we will rest awhile in this nice foxhole.

"Sleeping in Foxholes" can mean hiding in our own little world, obsessing about ourselves, our own needs, our problems.

"Retreating to Cemeteries" can mean drowning in our own grief, focusing only on our own issues, pushing our commitment to Christ back a few notches, not first and foremost, but second, or third or fifth...depending on what's on our plate. But if we are going to follow Jesus – if we are going to sign on to be his disciples...we accept that the journey starts now and there won't be much rest. The joy is in the travel, in the companionship with Jesus, in pleasing God and growing in faith.

The famous 20th Century Christian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called that joy The Cost of Discipleship. He wrote, "Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience, we have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey — we must behave like a neighbor to him. But perhaps this shocks you. Perhaps you still think you ought to think out beforehand and know what you ought to do. To that, there is only one answer. You can only know and think about it by actually doing it. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth."

Bonhoeffer speaks against what he calls cheap grace...that assumption that discipleship will be a cake-walk, full of blessing and happy times, with no challenge, no hardship, no sacrifice...the grace we give ourselves. He says, "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. Perhaps the scribe and would-be disciple who approached Jesus, both were expecting some cheap grace. But what Jesus' offers is costly grace:

Bonhoeffer again: Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a [person] must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs one's life, and it is grace because it gives the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner.

Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son: "You were bought at a price," the text in Corinthians says...and what has cost God much cannot be cheap for us. Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us. Costly grace is God in the flesh.

A wise man once said, "Discipleship is not an offer that a person makes to Christ....." But we like to think we are in control – most of the time we don't really need God.

Heidi was driving down the street in a sweat because she had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking place. Other drivers were honking at her she was getting increasingly stressed. You probably know the feeling.

Looking up toward heaven, she said "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking place, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life and give up swearing."

Miraculously, a parking place appeared.

Heidi looked up again and said, "Never mind. I found one."

There is a parallel passage to our Gospel Gem in Matthew...it's found in Luke. Interestingly enough, in that rendition, there is a third person who approaches Jesus, again, expressing desire to follow him, but this guy wants to first return to his house and say goodbye to visiting friends. Can you guess what Jesus said to him? By now, you won't be expecting warm fuzzies! Jesus says, rather bluntly,

"No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We've cast our lot with Jesus – stay out of foxholes...there's no time for cemeteries now! I don't know that any of us is fit for the kingdom – but we've been invited to follow the Son of Man... the Prince of Peace...the Lord of Lords....the life-giver. In my mind – it's the only Way to live!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.