

## Plowing Straight

Luke 9.51-62

FUPC  
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Do you ever start a project and then not finish it? Maybe it's a dream or wonderful goal that you've always thought about... and you can imagine what it would be like to reach that dream, but then it just seems to go up in smoke. Life gets in the way. We get distracted. We make choices that take us in a different direction. We run out of gas.

We've all been there haven't we? I've got a book I've been working on for a few years now. I'd love to finish it. But it seems there's always something in the way. I get busy with my work and there's no time, energy or inspiration left to move forward with my dream. At one point, I had a dream of getting my doctorate. I actually started the program but I didn't finish. I keep thinking that someday, I will. But at 72, my "somedays" are growing fewer by the year.

Even the small projects call to us as we walk by them without doing anything about it: a garage that needs cleaning, a garden that needs weeding, a house that needs painting, a roof that needs washing, a stack of books we never get around to reading, a cluttered room that cries for our attention. Even relationships become casualties of our tiredness or procrastination, or fear. There's someone we need to call, but don't. A conversation we should be having but we keep putting it off. A gift we wanted to send, but there's no time. Someone crying for our attention and interest and we're too busy to listen or stop and make ourselves fully available and present. There's always tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, the day after that.

Jesus knows all about this tendency to put things off. He ran into it all the time. He came to a point in his life when he knew it was time to meet his fate. It was time to go to Jerusalem. Going to Jerusalem was his death sentence and he knew it. The Scripture says that he "set his face" to go there... it means that nothing could stop him, nothing would keep him from getting there. He was determined, he was committed, he was absolutely resolute and unwavering in his goal. And to get there more quickly, he led his men through Samaria.

Of course, the Jews and the Samaritans had no time for each other... in fact, they were sworn enemies. Jesus instructed his disciples to line up accommodations for the night, but no one would show them hospitality. They were not welcome anywhere and they had to keep walking. It's in this setting that we learn of three people who vowed to follow Jesus or who were invited by Jesus to follow him. And all three found excuses for not following through.

**The first one said, "I'll follow you wherever you go..."** and in reply Jesus talked about the hardships of a life of faith. Every day was uncertain. Where to sleep. What to eat. "Foxes have holes. Birds have nests. But the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He knew an empty boast when he heard one. Maybe it was made in good faith but without counting the cost. Did this man who promised to follow Jesus know that there would be insecurity, discomfort, hunger, rejection? Jesus is challenging him, "Are you prepared to let go of your expectations? You think you have rights and privileges. But can you release them for my sake? There's another way of saying this: Can you let your ego take a back seat to your faith? Can you let someone else take the credit for a good idea you thought was original with you? Can you help someone who doesn't appear to "deserve" your help? And what if there's no "thank you"... or recognition, can you deal with that?

God's call isn't always to a life of convenience and glory. Sometimes, God's call leads in the direction of sacrifice and relinquishing our "rights" – giving up what we think we deserve and getting ourselves out of the way so that Spirit can work the mystery of miracles and transformation without our

interference. Jesus is challenging this man, “Are you up for that kind of life? You boast that you’ll follow me anywhere and do anything I ask. Are you so sure? Really?”

**The second person was invited by Jesus to follow him.** But he had an excuse: “I must first bury my father.” This didn’t necessarily mean that the man’s father had died. It probably meant that he was the eldest son and had the responsibility to care for his parents so that when death did come, he’d be there and take care of things.

Jesus often used hyperbole to teach spiritual truth. He exaggerated in order to make a point. He said “if your eye offends you, pluck it out.” “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven.” In this instance he said, “Let the dead bury the dead, come and follow me.” This man was unwilling to follow because it was against the social customs of the day. He would be seen as shirking his duty. It was the expectations of others and how he would appear to them that was more important than Jesus’ call to follow.

Anyone’s who’s left one religion to follow another will understand this. Some have been disowned by their family. Some have lost their jobs. Some have forfeited their inheritance for the sake of what they believed and were being called to do. The early Christians faced this kind of decision every day – as they were persecuted for their faith in Jesus, and people would boycott their businesses. Or they would be excluded from the synagogue. Or ultimately they would flee for their lives and persecution and death became a daily reality.

**Jesus invited a third person to follow him,** but this man’s reply sounds so much like what we might say, “I’ll follow you Lord, but first...” But first, what? But is a conditional word and usually negates everything in front of it. “I’d like to be more loving, but...” “I should be more patient, but...” “Our church should be giving more to missions, but...” “We should be involved with the poor and homeless, but...”

That little word “But” has a way of killing dreams, extinguishing creative ideas, and sabotaging life-changing plans. In response to this man’s excuse, Jesus says that whoever puts his hand to the plow has to keep moving forward and not look back. Looking back is a guaranteed path to losing our way and missing our calling. What does it mean to “look back”?

It happens when we’re prisoners of the past. Maybe we’ve never gotten over a major failure that profoundly affected us and we live with paralyzing guilt. Living with regrets over a choice we made that turned out to bring us a lifetime of pain, suffering or unhappiness.

Looking back can also mean hanging on to the past. Always longing for “the way it used to be”. Or worshipping at the altar of “We’ve never done it that way before.” It’s when we’re so focused on past glories and accomplishments that we can’t see the opportunities right in front of us. It’s when we spend more time talking about those days when life was good and we were healthy and happy, than making the most of today’s blessings and opportunities. It happens to individuals and it happens to churches – thinking about the glory days when the pews were full, and the church had more energy and optimism. It happens when we find our security in what’s familiar and known... where we’ve been, what’s behind us, rather than where we need to go.

Looking back also means that we’re no longer looking at where we’re headed. I used to spend summers on my Aunt Helen’s farm and it was there that I learned how to plow a field. At first, I’d look back to see where I’d been. Then I’d look down to see what I was rolling over. And then Uncle George stopped me and said, “Ron, if you want to plow straight, you have to look ahead. Pick out a

reference point, a tree, a fence post, a bush, and keep the front of the tractor lined up with that point.” When I began to do that, its amazing how straight my rows began to be.

The danger of taking our eyes off our goal is that we never reach our destination, we get lost, we get side-tracked, we lose our focus. Jesus is speaking about single-mindedness, commitment, determination, persistence, patience, sheer dogged endurance, finishing the job. He knew what awaited him in Jerusalem. The end was coming, It would be painful, demanding, the hardest moment of his life and he could not afford to look back, or be distracted or lose his focus.

The question this passage leads me to is this: Do you see yourself in any of these three people? Are you ready to give up on something – or someone? A vision, a goal, a project, a dream? What do you hear the Spirit whispering in your heart today?

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