



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Fit for the Kingdom of God

Luke 9:51-62

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Let me begin this morning by asking everyone here a question: Are you fit for the kingdom of God? Again, are you fit for the kingdom of God? We'll be looking today at Luke 9:51-62 and this is the question Jesus raises at the end of the passage, in verse 62. No one is fit for the kingdom of God. We've all rejected God and rebelled against him. That's what sin is and we're all guilty of sin. This is why God himself became incarnate as one of us in Jesus. He came to give himself in order to make us fit for his kingdom. And now Jesus calls to us. As we've seen through the gospel story Luke tells us, Jesus calls people to follow him. We'll see more of that today. He reaches out, he heals, he makes clean, he gives life—*he makes fit*. And the proper response then is to *follow* him. To follow is an act of trust, an act of *faith*.

When Jesus talks about being fit for the kingdom of God, he's talking about our willingness to follow—to *obey him in faith*. As we'll see, if we aren't ready to literally give up everything for his sake and to walk with him in faith, we're not fit for the kingdom. *To follow Jesus is an all or nothing venture*. You can't follow, you can't walk with, you can't obey Jesus by half measures. Think about that as we work our way through Luke's gospel today and think about the things in your life that show a half-hearted obedience and a half-hearted faith.

This is a good time to focus our attention on what it means to follow Jesus. Luke 9:51 begins a new section of Luke's Gospel that will take us through Chapter 19. For the first nine

chapters we've followed Jesus and his friends in his Galilean ministry as he's travelled from village to village in his home country, north of Judea. But as Jesus came to understand his calling, we've seen that he's recently started talking to his disciples about his going to Jerusalem. In the last few verses, Jesus has talked about his "exodus". He's going to follow in the footsteps of Moses, but whereas Moses led the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt, Jesus himself has become Israel and he will lead anyone who will follow, Jew or gentile, out of their bondage to sin and death. This is the *real* exodus. The exodus we read about in the Old Testament was a just a type or just a shadow that prepared the way for what Jesus is going to do. And now over the next ten chapters, we'll walk with Jesus as he makes his way to Jerusalem. He starts off travelling though Samaria, which was the shortest route there, but over these next chapters we'll see Jesus winding his way throughout the country. He takes a long time to get there, but along the way he calls people to follow him and at the same time takes the opportunity of this long and winding journey to teach his followers what it means to truly follow.

Look at verses 51-53:

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

Jesus "set his face" to go to Jerusalem. To set one's face is a Hebraism. It stresses commitment and determination. Jesus might take a wandering route to get there, but nothing was going to distract or direct him away from his goal of going up to Jerusalem. And why? Luke says it was because the "days drew near for him to be taken up". This is the only place in the whole New Testament where this Greek word for "taken up"

is used, but Luke uses it for a reason. It's a word that is used in the Old Testament. In fact, in the Old Testament it's used to describe Elijah when he was "taken up" to heaven. Remember that Elijah was the chief of the Old Testament prophets. He never died. Instead, he was caught up into heaven by a chariot of fire. So Luke emphasises that Jesus' going up to Jerusalem isn't just about rejection and death; his resurrection and his ascension are just as important. In fact, his rejection and death are just the first steps that make his ascension—his being "taken up"—possible. And in describing Jesus in the language that the Old Testament uses to describe Elijah, Luke casts the Church—he casts *us*—as Elisha, Elijah's disciple and successor. When Elijah was taken up, his mantle—the symbol of his office as a prophet—fell upon Elisha, who then carried on his ministry. So far the disciples haven't done much to show that they're prepared to take up Jesus' mantle. In the last passage we looked at Jesus had to rebuke them for their lack of faith and they couldn't even understand his rebuke. But all that will change. Maybe that's why Jesus takes such a long route to Jerusalem: his disciples need to learn what it means to follow, to be obedient, and to walk in faith with Jesus. For the same reason, Jesus doesn't simply save us and zap us to heaven. We have to learn to follow. We have to learn faith. The longer we walk with him, the more trials we pass through with him at our side, the deeper our faith and the more obedient we become. The deeper our faith the more ready we are to love our enemies, the less anxious we become about the future, and the more open-handed we become with our possessions and property.

Luke tells us that Jesus began his trip to Jerusalem by passing through Samaria. This was the most direct route between Galilee and Judea, but most people took the longer route, travelling out of their way to the east, so that they wouldn't have to pass through Samaria. As far as the Jews

were concerned, the Samaritans were unclean. Ever since the days of the divided kingdom in the centuries after Solomon died, the ten tribes in the north had had their own rival temple at Shechem. The Samaritans inherited that tradition. The Jews had destroyed their temple, but they rebuilt it on Mount Gerizim near Shechem. The Samaritans had their own version of the Bible. They rejected the prophets and the books the Jews referred to as the “Writings”. The Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Even then, the Samaritans had their own version. On top of that, over the centuries, they had absorbed the teachings and philosophy of the Greeks. In Jesus’ day the Samaritan form of Judaism was as Gnostic as it was Jewish. The Jews hated the Samaritans and the Samaritans hated the Jews back. It wasn’t uncommon for Jewish pilgrims who travelled through Samaria to be pelted with rocks. And yet Jesus doesn’t just take the shortcut through Samaria; he sent some of his disciples ahead to make preparations—probably to stay the night somewhere and maybe even to preach in one of their apostate synagogues. Again, we see that Jesus’ ministry is about reaching out to the poor, to the unclean, and especially to outsiders.

What’s interesting is the response. The Samaritans reject Jesus. Luke says that it was because of his determination to get to Jerusalem. Again, the rivalry between the Jerusalem temple and the Mt. Gerizim temple was one of the most obvious points of contention between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus was going to Jerusalem and so they hated him just like they hated all the other Jews who passed through on their way there. Their reason for rejecting Jesus highlights their status as outsiders and in this case especially it highlights the fact that they’re outsiders by choice. If Israel represented God’s kingdom, the Samaritans wanted nothing to do

with it. Israel is now centred in Jesus himself, but they won’t have anything to do with the new Israel either, just because of the association with Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that Jesus’ disciples were upset at their rejection by the Samaritans.

And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54)

Do you remember what Jesus told his disciples what they were to do if the people of a town rejected them? Back in 9:5 he told them, “Wherever they do not receive you, when you leave that town shake off the dust from your feet as a testimony against them.” Jesus came *not* to condemn and judge, but to save and redeem. Sinful humanity already stands condemned based on God’s judgement against our sins. There’s nothing that Jesus or his disciples or his Church can add to that condemnation. Jesus came to make a way of redemption so that those who acknowledge their sin, who repent, and who put their faith in him and in his lordship will be saved from the judgement and condemnation already decreed. Fire from heaven *is* coming. God is just and he will punish sin in the end. And this is why the Jews rejected Jesus. They knew God would punish sin. They also knew he would vindicate his people. That was what the Messiah was coming to do—or so they believed. This was why they looked forward to that day. They were sure that the Messiah would destroy all their enemies and vindicate them for their faithfulness. But Jesus came not at the end of history as the final judge. He didn’t come as a warrior or in a cloud of fire and brimstone. Instead he came into the middle of history, he came in humility, and he came to be a sacrifice for sins to provide a way of escape from the judgement that was coming at the end.

And here, again, the disciples forget this. They’re still thinking of Jesus as the Messiah who had come to judge and to condemn. “How dare these Samaritan scum reject you, Jesus!,” the disciples rage. “They’re heretics. They don’t deserve to lick our boots, but you came to share your message with them anyway and they rejected you. Can we call down fire from heaven to teach them a lesson?” They had just seen Elijah and Moses passing the torch to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus is now going to Jerusalem to be “taken up”—like Elijah was. And so they think of a punishment for the Samaritans that’s reminiscent of Elijah. Ahaziah was the king of Samaria in Elijah’s day. He rejected the Lord and he rejected Elijah as his prophet and when he sent fifty of his soldiers to arrest Elijah, Elijah called down fire from heaven that consumed them (2 Kings 1:1-16). The disciples are thinking that this is how God dealt with Samaritans who rejected him in the past. If Elijah has passed the torch to Jesus, maybe God will deal with Samaritans who reject him the same way today. More than anything it highlights how self-important and self-righteous the disciples are at this point. What also stands out is the fact that while we saw in the last passage that they lacked the faith to cast a demon out of a little boy, now they’re downright *full* of faith when it comes to calling down fire from heaven on their enemies.

Brothers and sisters, how often are we just like the disciples here? We lack the faith to truly trust and follow Jesus down the hard and difficult paths. We lack the faith to trust him when the storm comes on the sea. We lack the faith to feed the five thousand when Jesus himself asks us to feed them. We lack the faith to trust him with our relationships, with our families, with our children, with our jobs, with our possessions, with our finances. We lack the faith to share the Good News that Jesus is Lord with a hostile world.

But just like the disciples, when that hostile world rejects us—or rejects our more faithful brothers and sisters—we’re suddenly outraged and fired up for judgement. We won’t share the Good News with sinners, but we’re easily ready to grab our torches and pitchforks and to join the mob of people ready to condemn those same sinners. We forget our calling. Judgement and condemnation are God’s job. Our job, as it was Jesus’ job, is to love sinners and to proclaim to them the Good News that Jesus is Lord and to call them to repent of their sinful rebellion against him, *so that* they might be spared the judgement that is already laid against them.

This is why Jesus rebukes his disciples in verse 55 and in verse 56 they simply move on to another village. Jesus reminds them of his instructions: If they rejected you, shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them. It’s the same reason the Church is called not to execute unrepentant members, but to discipline them by excluding them from Christian fellowship and the sacraments. It’s intended to be a wakeup call to repentance.

In the second half of our lesson today Luke takes us down the road with Jesus. In verse 57 he writes:

As they were going along the road...

As they were following Jesus. All through this section of the Gospel, as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem, Luke emphasises the journey and the need to follow. That’s what faith is about. And here, as Jesus goes down the road he encounters three different people.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (Luke 9:57-58)

It’s interesting that Luke doesn’t give us any details about this person. He doesn’t give us a name or even tell us if it was a man or a woman; it’s just “someone”. I think there’s a reason for that. This could be any of us. We all like the *idea* of following the Messiah, but when it comes to actually following him we realise that the *idea* is different from the *reality*. Following Jesus means travelling through places like Samaria where no one will give us a bed to sleep in and where they might pelt us with rocks. Following Jesus means not only being in uncomfortable situations with tax collectors and sinners, but actually embracing them with the love of God. It means putting ourselves in situations in which we may be called upon to share our material possessions with the poor, to risk becoming unclean by associating with the sick and with sinners, and it might mean crossing social boundaries in order to reach out to those on the outside. This is where the rubber of our faith meets Jesus’ road. If our faith is weak or non-existent or if our priority is something other than love, we aren’t going to be willing to trust God with our finances in order to give for the sake of the kingdom. If our faith is weak we may not trust him to keep us clean as we embrace the unclean. And if our faith is weak and, again, if our priority is anything other than love, we’re likely to be too afraid of offending others or damaging our reputation to be willing to cross those boundaries to the outsiders on the other side. Jim Elliot penned those famous words in his journal, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The problem is that we’re too often faithless fools, unwilling to follow Jesus where he goes and unwilling to be obedient. But, brothers and sisters, consider the words God spoke on the Mount of Transfiguration: “This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him.” We may doubt Jesus, but God *himself* tells

us to listen and to listen means to follow, to trust, and to obey.

The man or woman of verse 57 came to Jesus. In verses 59-60 it’s Jesus who approaches a man and calls to him:

To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The first “someone” wanted to follow Jesus, but didn’t know what that meant. Jesus reminded that person that to follow him meant stepping out of his or her comfort zone in faith. It meant *sacrifice*. Think of Peter or Matthew, who gave up lucrative jobs to follow Jesus through the villages of Galilee. Sometimes they were welcomed and sometimes they were rejected. Jesus calls us to an “extreme” sort of following or an extreme sort of obedience. And we *think* we understand what extreme looks like. But now Jesus takes it further. This second man needed to bury his father. That meant putting his father’s body in the family tomb and then coming back a year later to place the bones in an ossuary or bone-box. The Old Testament stressed the supreme importance of honouring one’s father and mother. I don’t think we grasp the full extent of what this means anymore. Our culture doesn’t value family the way ancient cultures did. We honour our fathers and mothers by putting them in nursing homes to see that they’re taken care of by someone else, because it’s too much work for us. Our families are often separated by thousands of kilometers and so we build relationships and networks apart from our families. Again, their culture and the families envisioned by the Old Testament were very different. And to look after the burial of your father, in a way, sums up the whole of honour one’s father. There was no greater

duty short of honouring the Lord. And yet Jesus gives this man a higher priority and a higher calling. Following Jesus supersedes even the call to honour one's parents.

In fact, Jesus makes the same point with a third person in verses 61-62:

Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

When Elijah accepted Elisha as his disciple he allowed him to go home to say goodbye to his father and mother. Jesus reminds us again that he's not Elijah. In response to this man, Jesus gives the image of a farmer plowing his field. If he looks back, he'll run off course and plow a crooked furrow. I'm reminded of one of the first things I learned when I started bicycling with friends from the cycling team in University. When you're travelling down the highway at 80 or 100 kilometres per hour you never turn your head back. If you turn your head you inevitably turn your front wheel and go off course—something you don't want to do on a bike at 80 kilometres an hour.

Brothers and sisters, what Jesus is telling us is that following him is more than simply being obedient to a new set of rules. To follow Jesus is to *completely* reorient our lives around him. It's to give up our worldly loyalties and our worldly allegiances—to possessions, to friends, to family, to country—to pledge first and foremost to follow Jesus. Our most basic creed as his people is that Jesus is Lord. He speaks; we obey and follow. And we witness his lordship not only as we follow his lead, but as we live in faith, trusting that he has and will look after us just as he has promised. We follow him knowing that our hope is an eternal hope and so we follow even

when he leads us through the dark valleys, even when he leads us to rejection, and even when he leads us to death. We follow in faith because, brothers and sisters, he has gone there before us. For our sake he was rejected by men, he was crucified, and for us he rose from death and ascended to heaven. As St. Paul puts it, Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of our own—of all those who belong to him. And so I urge you this morning to think of your own faith and to consider the path you've taken in following Jesus. What are you holding back? What are you afraid to release control of and to give to him? What things in your life, what people, what priorities still compete with loyalty and allegiance to Jesus? And how much of your time is spent looking back. Again, are you fit for the kingdom of God? The good news is that there's no shame and no reason to dwell on our past failures. Jesus came not to condemn, but to redeem. He is the one who fills us with his Spirit, renews our minds, and regenerates our hearts. He is the one who has washed us clean in Holy Baptism and he's the one who strengthens us by feeding us his very self in Holy Communion. He is the one who makes us fit for the kingdom. He calls, he strengthens and equips. As he set his face to go up to Jerusalem for our sake, let us set our faces to follow him.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as your Son Jesus calls us to follow him, teach us what that calling means. Help us to understand the radical nature of discipleship and give us the faith to let go of earthly things and competing loyalties that we might follow wherever Jesus leads us. As he gave his life for us, give us the faith to give our lives for him. We ask this in his name. Amen.