

13TH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (C)

Our scripture passage comes from the Gospel of Luke 9:51-62. This is a very significant passage that marks the beginning of the second half of Luke's Gospel. In this scene Jesus begins His ten-chapter journey to Jerusalem. This journey is no ordinary trip. These chapters are filled with Jesus' most important teachings about discipleship as He progresses on His "Way" to fulfill His mission through His death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. (Note: Some translations of the New Testament use the word "road" instead of "way".)

It should pique our interest when the Gospel tells us that Jesus is on His "Way" (v. Lk 9:57). That is because the very first Christians did not call themselves "Christians"- that name wasn't developed until the Church was already established and functioning in Antioch (v. Acts 11:26). Rather, the first followers of Jesus Christ referred to themselves as Followers of "The Way" (v. Acts 24:14). Thus, when Jesus undertakes His ten-chapter "Way" to Jerusalem, He is really leading us as Followers of "The Way" as well. These chapters, then, offer deep insights into what it means to be a follower of Jesus. The first thing Jesus does in this journey is to identify the obstacles of discipleship that can prevent someone from having the freedom to follow the Lord. Let's study each of these obstacles to discipleship. The first obstacle is anger demonstrated by the disciples who want to stop their journey in order to take out revenge on the Samari-an town (v. Lk 9:52-56). They want revenge for the rejection they have experienced and they are willing to do terrible things in the name of religious righteousness. Jesus cautions the disciples that anger is really an anchor that will hold them back from following him. He also wants the disciples to know that His mission is about reconciliation and conversion rather than destruction and punishment. Jesus will accomplish the Father's will only by confronting those who oppose the Gospel in a non-violent way. Sometimes it can be easy for us to justify our actions based on how others have treated us or what others have done, but Jesus teaches James and John that true disciples do not stop following the way for the sake of retribution, anger, or vengeance.

- *When have you found anger to be something that distracts you in your life of discipleship that is causing you to turn your eyes away from Christ and be filled with violent disdain for others?*
- *What situations in our world today show how people can use religion as justification to carry out violence?*
- *Have you ever known of anyone whose faith has been eroded by anger?*
- *How have you experienced anger as something that takes away your freedom to follow Christ?*

The second obstacle to following Jesus with freedom is the desire for personal comfort and security. The first would-be follower of Jesus is cautioned that the animals live with greater security than the Son of Man and that's true for His disciples as well. Those who would follow Jesus on. His way must be prepared to be vulnerable and endure less comfort than others. When our priority concern is our self-preservation rather than our self-offering to God, then we cannot be a very good disciple because we will falter when we are called to make a sacrifice of faith or to endure some hardship for the sake of the Gospel. Many Christians of the first century endured such vulnerability as they suffered the loss of material comforts and financial security because of their discipleship.

- *How can the desire for comfort and security today present an obstacle that prevents people from being good disciples?*
- *What are the dangers Christians experience today as a result of being faithful?*
- *When have you felt the Gospel asking "too much" of you?*

The third obstacle to following Jesus with freedom is the desire to make the Gospel anything less than the top priority in our lives. While the statement of Jesus can appear harsh and insensitive, it is important to notice that nowhere in this passage does it say that the man's father has actually died. It is possible that the man was most likely saying to Jesus, "Let me stick around until all my other responsibilities are done and then I'll think about following you." Sometimes that's how we can approach our response to faith as well. Jesus cautions us that we can always find excuses to exempt ourselves from living the Gospel. When we do so, the Gospel will be the last thing in the world for which we give our time, talent, or resources. Sometimes it's easy to give God what's "left-over" in our lives rather than making God the priority of our lives. If God is our priority, then all other obligations and responsibilities will fall under that one, overarching duty to serve the Lord. We will only have the freedom to follow Jesus if He is the most important person in our lives.

- *What are some of the good excuses people use to exempt them from responding to the Gospel?*
- *When have you felt yourself "putting the Lord on the back burner" because something else was more important to you? Sometimes people can approach their lives in such a way that their faith is more ornamental than foundational to who they are. What does "ornamental" faith look like?*
- *What does "foundational" faith look like?*

What otherwise good priorities have you had to sacrifice in order to follow Jesus? Finally, Jesus says to the last would-be disciple that whoever puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God. When Jesus uses the word "fit"; He is

not referring so much to a person's moral character but rather to the stamina needed to face the challenges ahead. That's because the man wanted to fulfill his social and cultural obligations before he would follow Jesus. In short, he wanted to be polite and courteous according to the customs of his time. Jesus warns him that a disciple cannot conform to the social and cultural world around him. Rather, a disciple must have the courage and fortitude to follow Jesus even when it means being perceived in a negative way. As long as we are governed by political correctness, the expectations of polity, and other social norms, we will never really have the freedom necessary to be a disciple. Instead, we will make the Gospel subservient to social expectations.

- *When do you feel that your faith calls you to go against the social conventions and culture of your world?*
- *When do the expectations of others become an obstacle to your following of Jesus?*
- *Who are some Christians you admire who have gone against their cultural norms in order to witness to Christ?*

In the midst of challenging times, Archbishop Oscar Romero said, "Each one of you has to be God's microphone. Each one of you has to be a messenger, a prophet. The church will always exist as long as there is someone who has been baptized... Where is your baptism? You are baptized in your professions, in the fields of workers, in the market. Wherever there is someone who has been baptized, that is where the Church is. There is a prophet there. Let us not hide the talent that God gave us on the day of our baptism and let us truly live the beauty and responsibility of being a prophetic people:'