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Luke 9:51-67

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'Face Forward'

On a Sunday morning a mother walked past her son's bedroom and realized that he was still sleeping. She knocked on the door and said, "time to get ready for church." About ten minutes later there was still no movement from his room so she knocked again and said, "come on get ready, you are going to be late for church." Ten minutes later he came downstairs in his pyjamas and said, "I'm not going to church today and I will two good reasons why...number one those people don't like me. And number two...I don't like them. The mother crossed her arms and sternly said, "You are going to church today and I will give you two good reasons why. Number one, you are 45 years old. And number two, you are the minister!

Whether you are the minister, or the committee chair, or the deacon, or the Sunday school teacher, or the choir member...we all at times have good excuses. So today's gospel reading today is for all of us a lesson in commitment and fortitude and a teaching about true discipleship.

There is a story told about the death of King Henry IV. It had been predicted that the King would die in Jerusalem, which he took to mean that he would die while on crusade. But one evening while praying in Westminster Abbey he became very ill. He was carried to a small private room at side of the abbey called the Jerusalem Chamber. While struggling for his life and for consciousness the king asked his attendants where he was and they answered him simply Jerusalem. The King died in peace.

What we know of strong characters in history is that they often have an unshakeable vision and sense of purpose. No one however could match the resolve and single-mindedness of purpose Jesus had for his life. Jesus was on a mission. He knew that his life would end in Jerusalem and that he had battles to fight and lessons to teach along the way. And so it is with great conviction that the gospel writer Luke says, "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." It is an unusual phrase to set his face towards Jerusalem but Jerusalem was not simply a destination, Jerusalem was what he was all about. Jerusalem would be the place where many important events would occur but it would also be the place where the Christian story would be shaped and formed.

We know that as we continue to read Jesus' story of his journey to Jerusalem that he will face rejection; we know that he will experience disloyalty and abandonment; we know that he will suffer torture; we know that he will eventually be killed. Setting his face to Jerusalem was not something Jesus did lightly or carelessly and he put all of his heart and mind and soul into that journey and into his mission.

Making life changing decisions requires that we put our heart and minds and souls into them. During World War II my grandfather was stationed at the navy base in Honolulu. He proposed to my grandmother in a letter and asked her to move to Hawaii to marry him. Not long afterwards, my grandmother set off to California to wait for an announcement that a ship would be heading to Hawaii. The crossing was very dangerous and the boat could only travel at night without lights to avoid being

attacked. But my grandmother set her heart and mind on that journey and on that sailor despite the obvious risks and uncertainties.

But Jesus does not just call travellers to follow him for one risky journey, he calls people to change their whole direction and set their faces towards a lifetime of obedience. Jesus was looking for people who would not make excuses, he was looking for people who would not turn back, he was looking for people who would not be compromised, he was looking for people who would set their faces towards Jerusalem, towards the Christian faith, towards God's kingdom. Jesus wanted disciples.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, wrote that discipleship requires us to make a fundamental decision to follow Jesus and to accept the consequences of that decision. His convictions led him to stand up to the tyranny the Nazi's and to participate in a plot to assassinate Hitler. But the plot was uncovered, and Bonhoeffer was apprehended and hanged by the Nazis on April 9, 1945.

The cost of discipleship was extremely high but Bonhoeffer had made up his mind to actively live out his Christian faith. This was not a decision Bonhoeffer took lightly or carelessly, but he made up his mind and so he set his face in the direction Christ was heading, despite the risks, despite the sacrifices, despite the cost.

In our own lives we have many different things which call to us and beg for our allegiance and ask to be worshipped and idolized. The pressures on our time and our focus and our finances are complex and demanding. When we think about Jesus' great focus and internal motivation we are inspired but at the same time we are daunted, because we realize that the cost of discipleship, the cost of being a true follower of Christ is unquestionably high.

The people Jesus met on the road to Jerusalem had reasons to delay their discipleship, they had jobs, they had families, they had debts, they had aging parents - they had good excuses. St. Augustine before he accepted his own calling said famously, "Give me chastity and constancy but not yet." The cost of setting your face towards Christ's kingdom is high and the list of good excuses is long. But for Jesus the clock was ticking, he was looking for disciples to go with him, then and there, no excuses, no looking back. Jesus' words can sound quite harsh and unreasonable but the place where Jesus was going was not for the faint of heart. Jesus was being honest about the cost of discipleship, the harvest is great and the workers are few.

Our biblical stories remind us of many who offered their own good excuses, Jeremiah said he was too young, Moses claimed he had a stutter, Abraham and Sarah thought they were a bit too old, Isaiah said he was too unholy, Gideon said he came from the weakest tribe, David said he was just a shepherd boy. These were all people who had been called but were not quite convinced that they were ready to set their faces towards God's kingdom.

But when our excuses no longer drown out God's calling we are given the chance to become Christ's followers. It is a fundamental shift in being, we no longer live for ourselves, for our families, for our achievements, for our possessions but we live first and foremost for God and God's kingdom. Jesus calls to each of us in our own ways to follow him and serve him with our gifts and talents. Jesus still looks for disciples

who are willing to follow him each and every day. From what I have learned about The Georgetown Presbyterian Church, this is a community that tries to heed God's call and take seriously the service of God's kingdom. When I was visiting Georgetown in May, I had dinner with the members of the nominating committee. As the meal began each committee member took turns telling me a bit of their story. They all told me about how they had come to this church and what it meant to them. These were stories about life and faith and the place in Georgetown where they had found to bring the two together. I felt privileged to hear their stories and inspired by the value they placed in this community. The cost of discipleship is high but we gain great strength from walking alongside other committed disciples. In churches like Georgetown when Christians are journeying together it is not only more sustainable, it is also a lot more enjoyable.

Someone once said there are two kinds of people in this world, those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord." And those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, it's morning."

As Christ's disciples, as ministers of the gospel, each and every day we should wake up saying, "Good morning, Lord" and set our faces towards God's kingdom. All of us who strive to be Christians know that it is a daily act of discipline, a daily commitment to accept the costs of discipleship, a daily decision to make our primary identity be a Christian identity.

Martin Luther was once asked, "Where will you be, Brother Martin, when church, state, princes, and people turn against you?" Martin answered, "Why then as now, in the hands of Almighty God."

The cost of discipleship might be high but the value of being in the hands of Almighty God cannot be counted. The journey with Jesus has risks but even greater rewards. God is looking for good and faithful servants of the gospel, God is looking for people to set their hearts and minds towards the grace and truth and love of Jesus Christ. So the question becomes not what will we say when we wake up in the morning but more importantly...which way will we face?

Amen.