

Sunday June 26th, 2022

Luke 9:51-62 “First Things First”

Every once in a while, I think of an old movie released in 1992. A movie starring Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn came out called “Death Becomes Her”. I don’t recommend it, but it sticks with you. It was very weird, and dark humor at best, and the few funny parts aren’t worth the cost of the movie rental on a streaming service. That being said though, the basic premise of the movie, actually turns out to be a great illustration of the condition of all humankind outside of Christ.

Here therefore, is a summary, as brief as I can make it: two very vain women (played by Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn) acknowledging that they are aging, want to stay looking young forever. They have heard from an acquaintance, of a secret formula that can preserve their youthfulness. They pay a hefty price and accept a potion from some mysterious voodoo-type woman, and drink it. What the woman doesn’t tell them, is that when they die, or they get seriously injured, their bodies will stay animated, although they will then begin to decay.

Obviously, early in the movie, both women meet an early ‘demise’. After that, no matter what happens to them, they stay animated (‘alive’, if you will), but the damage done to their bodies by falling down stairs, or getting shot, or whatever, stays with them. As the movie progresses, they are using more and more makeup to cover their decay like reattaching limbs with glue, or whatever. They are not dying, but are also forever dead.

Like I said, the movie is supposed to be a comedy. But I don’t feel like laughing thinking about this odd story. Because in reality, this is all of humankind in the eyes of God. We are trying to preserve by natural means what is already dead. Physically we see this all the time with cosmetics promising to be “age defying”. People take to plastic surgery or Botox injections to try and stay looking younger.

Maybe I shouldn’t say’ but I have noticed that people who get facelifts, just look unnatural don’t they. The issue extends beyond the physical. More serious is the living death people are experiencing separated from Christ Jesus. Jesus talked about this situation a great deal, with some powerful illustrations. He called Pharisees “white washed tombs” and a brood of vipers”.

The serious truth is, we are dead in sin without the righteousness offered in Christ Jesus. And unlike the movie death does not become us. Its decay, and ugliness, reveals itself in all kinds of ways. The worst thing is that even we who believe in Christ still flirt with death. We like to hang onto the old at the expense of the new. We think we can put new wine in old wineskins>

Today’s gospel ([Luke 9:51-62](#)) is a difficult one to meditate on. It’s a confrontational passage and it doesn’t leave much, if any, wiggle room. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” The blunt point is; we’re either looking toward the kingdom of God, or we are not. We’re either responding to the call of life, or we’re not. We’re either open to the coming future or we’re not. Our choice is life or death.

This choice has always been set before God’s people. All we need do is read Deuteronomy 30, where the choice is explicit. God says to the Israelites through Moses.

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“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity...I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you, life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...” (Deut. 30:15, 19)

Jesus is calling us into question and that’s never easy, fun, or comfortable. He is calling into question the direction of our life, the values we claim to hold, and how we are living and embodying those values. He is asking us to look at ourselves, rather than the Samaritan on whom we’d like to call down fire from heaven. Yes, I said and meant Samaritan.

By Samaritan I mean those who look, act, and believe differently from us; those who do not hold our particular religious or political beliefs; those who are not from these parts; those to whom we are opposed and in conflict with, for whatever reasons. And if you’re not sure who your Samaritans are, look at your social media feed, and who posts the articles and comments that push your buttons, turn on the news channel you refuse to watch, picture the face of one you crush and defeat in the arguments that go on in your head.

Today’s gospel won’t let us turn away from the people, and situations, that are right in front of us or the future that is coming right at us. Jesus recognizes and holds before us the tension in which we live. On the one hand we say to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” On the other hand, we say to him, “But first let me go and” You probably know what that’s like. I know I do. When have you experienced that tension? When has it felt like you were being pulled in two directions, the way of Jesus and some other way? In what ways have you said, “But first let me go and...?”

It’s easy and simple to follow Jesus, in principle. At least it seems that way. Love your neighbor as yourself, love your enemy, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give the thirsty something to drink, turn the other cheek, forgive not just seven times but seventy times seven. These are values Jesus holds. That’s where Jesus is going. That’s the direction in which he has set his face.

That’s the road to Jerusalem and it sounds good and inviting, at first. Most of us probably agree with those values or at least some of them. It’s the road we, who claim an allegiance to Jesus have chosen to travel, in principle. But it’s so much harder and messier to follow Jesus in life than in principle. When our faith is more than theoretical, it can almost be too much to bear. So, for most of us, faith is a grand thing as long as it only goes so far.

Its like I have mentioned quite often. As believers we love to relish in the Easter experience but would rather avoid the Good Fridays of our lives. The days that call us to sacrifice and struggle.

I suspect we are all in favor of love, hospitality, forgiveness, and nonviolence; until we meet the unlovable, the stranger who scares us, the unforgivable act, the one who throws the first punch, or the Samaritan in our life. Then it’s a different story and that story usually begins with, “But first...” Jesus, however, puts no qualifications, limitations, or exceptions on where he is going, who is included, or what he is offering.

His face is set to Jerusalem and all that that means, and he calls us to face that direction as well.

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He doesn't seem to care who we are, where we are from, or what we have done or left undone. Conservative or Liberal, citizen or foreigner, Christian or Muslim, gay or straight, black or white, good or bad, believer or nonbeliever just don't seem to matter to Jesus. For him there is no why, and no conditions; attached to love, hospitality, forgiveness, or giving. He does not allow for a "but first" in his life, or the lives of his followers.

"But first" is the way we put conditions on the unconditional. Yes, I will love the other, but first let me go and see who the other is, and whether she or he is deserving of love, and whether I like him or her, and whether he or she agrees with and is agreeable to me. Yes, I will open my door to and welcome the stranger, but first let me go and see who's knocking, how different he or she is from me, what she or he wants, or what I am risking.

Yes, I will forgive another, but first let me go and see if she or he has acknowledged her or his wrongdoing, is sorry for what they did, and has promised to change. Yes, I will give to and care for another, but first let me go and see why I should, what it will cost me, and what's in it for me. But first.... We do not like it when other people give us excuses to avoid involvement, so why should Jesus?

It's as if we are backing our way into the kingdom while keeping an eye on the door. It's as if we are walking backwards into our future, not wanting to see or deal with what is before us. It's as if we have put our hand to the plow and looked back. And we already know what Jesus thinks about that.

Personally, I don't want to back my way through this life. I don't want to live, if you will pardon a bad pun, a butt first life. And I hope you don't either. I want us to turn and lead with our hearts; that deep heart that loves the unlovable, forgives the unforgivable, welcomes the stranger, and gives without seeking a payback, or even a thank you.

I wasn't kidding when I said that this is a difficult gospel. I wish I could resolve this in some neat and simple way, as much for myself as for you, but I can't. It's never about resolving the gospel. It's about resolving ourselves, resolving our heart. That resolution is not a simple or one time decision. It's a way of being in this world, a way of relating to others, a direction for our life. It's a choice we make every day. It's the road to Jerusalem.

That means looking at the ways in which we are backing through life. It means naming the people and situations to which we have turned our backs, and acknowledging that we do sometimes live a "but first" life. I wonder what our lives and world would be like if we were to love, give, welcome, and forgive without a "but first?"

I think it would be risky, and scary, and look pretty crazy. But as I look at the world, read the news, and listen to the lives and stories of others, the world is already risky, scary, and crazy. So, what if we took a better risk, faced a better fear, and lived a kinder craziness? And what if we were to let that start with you and me, today, in our lives, in our particular situations, and with whoever or whatever is before us?

What if we were to lead with our hearts and not "but(t) first?"

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You see our lives are not a template for people to follow to be faithful. All of us have heard sincere people say something like, “I don’t think you have to go around telling people about Jesus. I think all you have to do is live a life that Jesus wants you to live so others can see that life and what to become Christians themselves. That’s what I do.” They declare, with an almost smug assurance that they have found a solution to their reluctance to mention Jesus.

However, as Tony Campolo points out, such a declaration and belief is the height of arrogance. Just think about what such a position says about us. What we are saying if we declare these sentiments is that I don’t have to explain Jesus to anyone. I am so righteous that all I have to do is let people take a good look at me and they will fall over converted. Such a belief is terrifying to me. I don’t know about you but there are enough flaws and shortcomings in my life that I do not want people to look to closely at me lest they become disillusioned about the faith.

Like the Apostle Paul I do not want to preach myself; I seek to preach Christ. I do not want to hold my life up as a glowing example of righteousness, because only Jesus is worthy emulation. All the rest of us fall short of the glory of God. It is from learning and meeting Jesus that people gain the opportunity to enter a transforming relationship with God-transforming us to become instruments of love and justice so we can with God’s help transform the world.

Knowing Christ and following him in the way he is going is your only option for peace, hope and relevance to a lost and hurting world.