

SERMON--06-30-2019

It's a shame Jesus didn't have social media technology in his day. In this passage from Luke 9, it looks like Jesus couldn't even *buy* followers for his ministry as you can "buy" followers for your website or social media page. And the few followers he had didn't understand his ministry at all.

In verse 51, we read that Jesus "*resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*" A literal translation of this verse reads he "*set his face towards Jerusalem.*" Jerusalem, the cultural capital of the Jews, was the place where religious and political power met. Jesus' disciples thought he was going to Jerusalem to establish his earthly kingdom. They were excited. In fact, in verse 46 just before this, they had been discussing which of them would be greatest in Jesus' kingdom. To them, Jerusalem meant power and status. But Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem knowing that this is the place where he would have to suffer and die.

The disciples didn't understand where Jesus was leading them. If they had known, they would have thought he was leading them backwards. "*What do you mean you're going to Jerusalem to suffer and die?*" But Jesus was moving forward by obeying God's will and fulfilling God's plan for the well-being of humanity and the redemption of creation. That's why this opening verse about setting his face toward Jerusalem is so important to understand. Unwavering purpose like that is hard to find these days. So many of our choices are shaped by the next thing that goes viral on social media. We're bombarded with messages that make us think we might be missing out on something—something newer, something better. So, how do we discover what's most important in life? And once we discover it, how do we commit our lives to it?

Most driving instructors—a well as plowmen— say, "What most people do when they start to go into a skid is focus on what they fear hitting: that telephone pole, oncoming traffic, a pedestrian. Instead, you must focus on where you want to go . . . Whatever you focus on you instinctively move toward." Don't you wish sometimes that God would grab your head and turn your focus on him? Remember: ". . . you must focus on where you want to go."

I think that's what Jesus was doing in this passage in Luke 9. He was trying to help people refocus their lives on the things that really count. Luke tells us that as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem, the home of their long-time arch-enemies—the Jews. When the disciples, James and John, saw this, they asked, "*Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?*" It's amazing how "out of sync" his disciples are sometimes with Jesus' purposes.

Jesus and his disciples then went on to another village. As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "*I will follow you wherever you go.*" Jesus replied, "*Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Human One has no place to lay his head.*" He said to another man, "*Follow me.*" But he replied, "*Lord, first let me go and bury my father.*" Jesus said to him, "*Let the dead bury*

their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Look at all the players in this passage. They were all focused on achieving their own agendas. One person even said he wanted to follow Jesus, but first must *“bury my father.”* In Jewish custom, there was only one exemption from the duty of attending to the body of a loved one and seeing it buried with respect. That exemption was for the High Priest who, because of his unique duties, could not risk being made ritually unclean by touching a corpse. Yet here is Jesus saying to a would-be disciple, *“No, put God’s kingdom first. Let the dead bury the dead.”* Your first loyalty is to life, not to death. Unless you make that choice unconditional, you are still caught up in the coils of death. *Let the dead bury the dead. As for you, go and speak out for the kingdom of God.* God must come first; not even the most sacred obligations as understood by our culture or religion can be allowed to wedge themselves between a Christian and their God. Everything else is subject to the power of death, so, choose life... choose real life!

Jesus never hid the demands of the Kingdom from those who wanted to follow him. That’s why he had such trouble *getting* followers. Unlike social media, you can’t just commit to follow Jesus by buying 500 likes for \$30. Following Jesus means setting your face resolutely toward Jerusalem. No other priorities. No conditions. No going back.

So, what does that kind of resolve look like for Jesus-followers today? Setting your face toward Jerusalem means yearning for God’s will more than your own. Setting your face toward Jerusalem also means submitting to God’s will, fearlessly, unconditionally. Finally, setting your face toward Jerusalem means sharing your faith in Jesus *confidently*, so that others, too, can come to know God. You never know whose life will be changed because you were faithful and unafraid in sharing the love of Jesus. Setting your face toward Jerusalem isn’t easy. It means giving up your own agenda and comfort to follow God’s will. For Jesus, Jerusalem meant humiliation, and defeat, even death. But for the human race, for you and me, Jerusalem meant reconciliation with God and ageless life. Do you believe in that love enough to set your face toward Jerusalem now, too?

One of the things we have to do here at Bethany Beach is “make all things new.” That doesn’t mean a new paint-job or designing new bulletins or re-thinking long-term boards and committees. Like the resurrected Jesus, it means experiencing new life, renewed vigor. We, too, have to *“let the dead bury the dead;”* the past is past; spending time musing over *“shoulda, coulda, woulda”* and yearning to get back to what was accomplishes nothing. Right now, we have to envision our world as God would want it to be in the future...not just as it was in the past.

What do you see this church doing? What do you see happening? Where do we see ourselves going? We have to focus on *“thy Kingdom come”* that we’ve been praying for. Sure, calling a new minister and getting things back to

normal is our priority...but is it God's? Maybe we should spend time praying and discerning what God's Kingdom—not ours!—in Bethany Beach should be. And then be ready, with God's help, to call a “new” leader to put God's plan into action!