Sermon | Proper 8C

TEXT: Luke 9:51-62

26 June 2016

“*Cost*”

*In the +Name of Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints of God,

Has anyone ever invited you to follow them, and their invitation brought great fear?

Maybe someone invited you to get up on a horse for the first time, learn how to ride.

Maybe someone invited you, “Come with me, we’ll learn how to go scuba diving in the ocean.”

Maybe someone invited you to move with them to a part of the country you’ve never been before.

Maybe it was “Pastor, we’re inviting you to get up on this platform in this dunk tank, we’ll see if we can dunk you.” Ah, the dunk tank: that great VBS tradition.

Has anyone ever invited you to follow them, and their invitation brought great fear?

I’m not much of a snow skier. I’ve only been skiing a couple of times in my life. Once as a boy, I was invited to follow some people on a ski trip in the mountains of Pennsylvania. I remember standing in line, waiting for the chair to take us up this mountain. It was a huge, scary mountain. I wasn’t sure I really wanted to follow them up the mountain. But I remember as the line progressed forward, off to the side, there was this sign that said, ‘Point of No Return.’ In other words, if you were going to chicken out, get scared, maybe make a split second decision that you’d rather sip a hot tea all day than go skiing, you could do so only up to this ‘Point of No Return.’ After that there was no turning back, no turning around. You were going up the mountain and coming back down the mountain one way or another—either by skiing or by rolling (for me it was probably rolling), past this ‘Point of No Return.” Terrifying.

Sometimes folks invite us to follow them. And we’re a little leery, frightened, because of all the unknowns—What will it cost me? If I follow, what am I going to have to give up? What dangers await me? What problems does the future hold? What’s life going to be like past this ‘Point of No Return?’

I say all of that because our Gospel is all about following Jesus. It’s all about discipleship. As we just sang in the H.O. D., “Come Follow Me, the Savior Spake.” Today, Jesus bids us follow him. And Jesus has three potential followers, disciples, who may follow him. But what he’s doing for them, what he’s doing for us, is warning them, warning us of the cost of discipleship. “Are you prepared, are you ready, to face the costs? Because if you follow me, here’s what it will cost you.”

And here’s the picture we have to have in our minds: these three disciples come up to him, and Jesus is standing there at a fork in the road. Two roads, going two different directions. One road leads them back to their homes, to the comforts, familiarity of their world they know. This road promises no suffering, no sacrifice. If you take this road, you can have the glories of the world now. We’ll call it **the Glory Road.**

Here we have to imagine a road that’s smooth and paved, a road that’s lined on either side with the world’s treasures—gold, silver, jewels spilling out all over the place. Imagine a road where even the weather is good. It’s sunny and shiny. It’s even lined with all of your favorite foods—steak, pizza—whatever whets your appetite. If you take this road, you can have it all. It’s an eight lane highway. Everyone who is of the world is going down it. But here’s the bad news. At the end of the Glory Road, there is a dead end. No hope, no future lies at the end of the **Glory Road**.

Jesus standing at the fork in the road, bidding these potential disciples come follow him, down a different road. The road has some clouds, foreboding skies ahead. This road is lined with many dangers. What are those dangers? The dangers of persecution. The dangers of rejection. The dangers of dying to self: dying to ourselves, our sinful wants and desires, and all of the things of this world that we would otherwise cling to and hold onto— anything and everything that competes for our faith, trust, confidence, anything that keeps us from following Christ—dying to idols, dying to ourselves. This road is filled with the dangers of suffering, the dangers of dying. And Jesus is standing there at the beginning of this road. And at Jesus’ feet there is a cross. And Jesus says, “*Pick it up. Follow me. Take up your cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it*.”

And this road is called the **Humility Road.** But the good news is that the end of this road, far off in the distance, is the Empty Tomb, is the Resurrection, is the promise of life forever with God in the bliss of eternal life. At the end of this road is the glory of heaven. So while the Glory Road promises, “Glory now,” it can give you no hope, no future in the life of the world to come. But the Humility Road promises, “Suffering now,” but glory in the life to come.

Again Jesus is warning these potential disciples of the cost of discipleship, of following him. So the first potential disciple comes to him and says*, “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.”* In other words, are you prepared to be homeless like I am? Are you prepared lose your home, your possessions? Are you prepared to have no place to stay? Are you prepared if folks turn you away, lock their doors to you because you bear my name? These things may happen down the Humility Road.

*To another Jesus 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.” 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.”* These are severe words, demanding words, they demand all-or-nothing. It’s like Jesus is saying, you have reached the Point of No Return. If you follow me, there’s no turning around, no going back. You can’t take both roads, the Glory Road and the Humility Road. Following me is an all or nothing proposition. The Point of No Return.

We have to be clear what Jesus is saying. He’s not telling us that, if you are a Christian, you’re literally not allowed to bury loved ones or say goodbye to your family at home. This is Jesus way of calling us away from earthly, worldly attachments. What are those worldly attachments that tempt us away from a life of discipleship? What are those worldly attachments you’re hanging onto, won’t let go of, won’t give up, keep us from following Jesus down the road of Humility?

And we all have them. Anything that keeps us from Jesus is called a god, an idol. And we all have gods, idols that we’re tempted to serve in our lives. An idol is anything which vies for our allegiance and our worship and our trust, keeps us from trusting and following Christ. When you look at your life, what are those things for you? The idols, the gods in your life? Is it some sin, some habit or addiction? Is it worldly glory, the promise of wealth? The promise of happiness? The promise of an easy, carefree lifestyle that’s safe, and comfortable, and predictable? What are the idols that stand in the way of taking up your cross? Of dying to self? Of following Christ? Today, Jesus says, “Put them down. Repent of them, die to them. Take up your cross. And follow me.”

But again, invitations to follow can be scary. We don’t know what the future holds, where the path leads, what lies ahead. We don’t know what life will be like past the Point of No Return. How is it that anyone can answer Jesus’ call to follow him—without knowing the dangers that await?

Here’s the only way: that if we know and believe that this Road of Humility—Jesus has taken it before. Jesus has already walked the path of Humility for us, and now, seated at God’s right hand, he’s entered into the glory that awaits every Christian.

You see, the beginning of today’s Gospel started like this: it said, Jesus has his own “Point of No Return.” This is verse 51: “*When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem*.” Now his disciples didn’t know why he was going to Jerusalem. The crowds that followed him didn’t know why he was going to Jerusalem. Maybe he was going to Jerusalem to kick out the Romans. Maybe he was going to Jerusalem to restore the kingdom to Israel. Maybe going to Jerusalem was good news.

Well you and I know why he was going to Jerusalem. He was going to the cross. The cross was his destiny. The cross was the Father’s will. The cross was the reason he, the Son of God, took on flesh, and was incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary in the first place. The cross was where Jesus was going. Because you and I were held in bondage, prisoners to sin and death, guilty and condemned under the Law’s sentence of condemnation for our sin, and headed toward eternal separation from God. Until Jesus went to the cross to redeem us from the curse of the Law. Jesus went to the cross to become a curse for us, dying in our place, so that we might be declared righteous in his place. It’s because of the cross that we have forgiveness, and eternal life. It’s because of the cross that we’re saved by grace through faith alone. Which means it’s not up to us to earn our salvation by our works of the Law. Your forgiveness, life, salvation is already a done deal, through the blood of Christ, and you receive it in faith.

This is the good news of the Gospel. That, as Luke says, he ‘*set his face’* toward Jerusalem. And when it says that he “*set his face*,” it means something like this: “*he made his face like stone*.” He wasn’t going turn around. He wasn’t going to flinch or hesitate or have second thoughts. He wasn’t going to let anyone or anything turn him off this Road of Humility, or steer him away from the cross.

We know that plenty of people tried, to tempt Jesus off the Road of Humility, and onto the Road of Glory. Remember Satan in his final temptation? Took Jesus to a high mountain, showed him the kingdoms of the world and all their glory? “All this I will give you, if you bow down and worship me.” “Here Jesus, take the Glory Road. You don’t have to take the Humility Road. You can have glory now, no suffering!”

Remember Peter? Just after Jesus finished telling his disciples *he must go to Jerusalem,* go to the cross, die, and be raised, Peter begins *to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.”*And again it’s the same temptation. “Here Jesus, we can take the Glory Road. We don’t have to take the Humility Road, the road of suffering. We can have glory now, no suffering.”

And of course Jesus said, “*Get behind me Satan*.” Because he “*set his face*.” There was no turning back, no giving up. And thanks be to God that our Lord resisted those tempting voices to take Road of Glory, because now that his journey of Humility is ended, he is risen, ascended, seated in glory.

And in view of that, we can follow him. We might not know what the future holds. We might not know where the Road of Humility is taking us. But we know the end, we know the goal, we know the hope that we all share, as believers in Christ, the empty tomb for Jesus, open graves for you and me on the Last Day. As Luther once said, “I may not know where life’s path is taking me. But I do know my leader.” We do know Christ, we do not that nothing in all the world can separate us from his love. And so we press on. We take up our cross. We do the work of our calling. We suffer and die with Jesus here, so that when he comes again, we may live with him there, in glory everlasting.

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spir*it. Amen.