

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
September 5, 2010
Luke 9:57-62
“Plowing Ahead”

I just read to you six verses from Luke’s gospel. They are printed in the bulletin; I could have asked you each to read these verses silently to yourself. But the deep meaning of this passage only becomes evident when it is read out loud. Let me explain.

If you have traveled to Italy or visited a museum that has artifacts from the ancient Roman Empire, you may have noticed that it is difficult to read the Latin inscriptions on monuments (even if it is just to pick out a word or two). The letters were all written in the upper-case and tended to run together. Up until the second century AD, it was the practice to place a small dot between words carved in stone so that you could tell when one word stopped and another began. But then this practice stopped altogether, making it much harder for the eye to decipher run-on texts. Historian Paul Saenger has suggested that the ancient world never desired to make reading easier or swifter. Those who could read were expected to read out loud, slowly, and to do so in a public fashion. The lack of word spacing forced the reader to sound out the letters so as to decide where to separate the text into individual words. That’s why medieval monks were put in stone-walled carrels in their monasteries, so they could read aloud the books they were copying without disturbing one another.¹

In Luke chapter 9, you heard me read aloud a description of Jesus’ encounter with three possible disciples. You might have expected Jesus to be quite enthusiastic when people expressed an interest in becoming his followers. Churches today expend vast sums of money in self-advertising, giving visitors flowers, loaves of fresh-baked bread, or at least a hearty handshake. But Jesus’ responses were not welcoming. In fact, they sound harsh when read out loud: *“Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Let the dead bury their dead. No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

Some bible commentators have tried to explain this brusque tone by saying that Jesus needed committed followers, not people who joined him out of curiosity or for superficial reasons. Jesus wanted quality, not quantity, in his pool of disciples. There is some truth in that explanation. At this point in his ministry, Jesus has intentionally set his face to go to Jerusalem (Lk 9:51). He is focusing in on a road that will lead him to the cross – to a dark period of rejection, suffering, and death. Anyone accompanying him on that road needed to be able to handle rejection and to endure the loss of all the relationships and routines that shaped their life before deciding to follow Jesus. They had to leave their nets, walk away from the fishing boats, distance themselves from children, spouses and family, and travel down a road that offered neither creature comforts nor easy answers.

Was this a type of reverse psychology on Jesus' part? Announce that only a limited number will be admitted to an event and crowds will bang down the doors to get in. Country clubs flourish, not just because of the amenities they offer, but also because of the mystique of exclusivity built into their selection process, and expensive enrollment dues. But Jesus isn't using reverse psychology. He has just passed through a Samaritan village that refused to receive him. He has already endured taunts and threats, and more will follow. So his words have an edge to them. 'Foxes and birds, carrion-eating wolves and vultures, have places to stay, but I have none. Every cultural expectation, whether pagan or Jewish or just plain human, would tell you to care for your parents and help bury those who have died. But I am calling you to a life that redefines every relationship and re-prioritizes every action you are considering.' Hearing Jesus' words read out loud, slowly, emphatically, makes it clear how serious Jesus considered the call of discipleship for himself and any who would follow him.

The third response of Jesus, the one about putting a hand to the plow, likely builds upon the story of Elijah and Elisha we read earlier in this service. It's a great anecdote in which Elisha is guiding a team of twelve oxen, so they will make straight furrows in the field they are plowing. Elijah, the famous prophet, appears beside him and places his mantle upon him. This was a way of designating that Elisha should follow him, literally as a disciple and symbolically as his successor. Elisha, who's out in the field, asks permission to say goodbye to his parents, to which Elijah says in effect, "Do what you want. You need to decide what this call means to you." Elisha then says goodbye by burning his bridges – or, in this case, burning his ox-yokes, before following Elijah. He gathers the family, slaughters the oxen, roasts them on a fire made from the very equipment of his prior farming life, and then sets off on a new path following Elijah.

So how are we to take these scriptures to heart and apply them to our own lives today? How are we to appropriate Jesus' challenging words about the call to discipleship? Are we all to leave our nets and leave our families? Are we to burn our bridges and our oxen – refuse to bury the dead, and walk away from everything to follow Jesus? There is the clear message here that serving God is not to be one priority amongst many. Jesus isn't saying that other things have no value, but he does make clear that one goal, one standard, ranks above all others. That's why in the gospels he tells so many parables about how the realm of God is like the pearl of great price, the treasure hidden in a field, the yeast that leavened the entire loaf.

But let's return one last time to the question about why this passage needed to be read aloud. For about five hundred years, from the second until the seventh century, the little dots between words were omitted in Latin manuscripts and inscriptions. Texts were read out loud to help decipher the words and get their true meaning. But in time, in Ireland and England, the local priests were having so much trouble with the Latin that the scribes began adding spaces back between words in the liturgical texts. This made reading out loud more fluent and the monks could now copy their manuscripts in silence, helping many of them keep their vows. Eventually everyone could read to themselves. Books could be pulled off a shelf and read silently in a comfortable chair all by one's self. More significantly, the meaning of the text was now something to be

reflected upon silently in one's own mind. No longer was reading a public act – with words heard by all and interpreted together by all. Now it became a private act, allowing for individual reflection and individual decisions about what a passage actually meant.

If you read the passage from Luke 9 silently, all alone, one conclusion you will likely draw from it is that the life of faith places incredibly hard demands on you. Christ calls us to homelessness and a life detached from worldly possessions, for the Son of Man and those who follow him have no place to lay their heads. Christ calls us to choose between the demands of family life and the expectations of Christian discipleship, so that obvious things like burying the dead are no longer top priority on our agenda. And if we struggle with this, if we look back once we've put our hands on the plow, once we've said "Yes" to Christ, then we are no longer fit to follow where he leads. Reading this passage silently in our heads, we will shake our heads in disbelief and wonder, "Who can hope to meet such demands?"

But this passage describes a time when Jesus had set his face to go to Jerusalem. And what awaited him there? A cross. And why is he going toward a cross? Out of a profound love for all the world. Nothing would deter Jesus from fulfilling his calling – although both demons and mortals would try – for his calling was aimed at the redemption of the entire world. His journey was one that offered life to all people and salvation to lost generations, those alienated from God, from one another, and from themselves. The same one who warns against looking back once you've put your hand to the plow is also the one who says, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they are doing."

Read this bible passage silently to yourself and you'll be convinced that you can never wear this yoke of faith. Your knees will buckle and you'll never believe you can answer this call. But read this passage out loud, in church, near a communion table spread with provisions for the journey, the table where the risen Christ is both host and sustenance, and you will grasp that what is being required of us is possible when done together. It is possible when done with Christ, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. It is possible when done with one another, as part of this shared, living, body of Christ. It is our shared call to be the church, the light and hope in a world struggling without the gospel's good news.

We stand together on a path that leads to a cross and to an empty tomb. We have minimal provisions for the journey – some bread and juice – but it is enough. Nothing is to distract us from heeding this call. We are to plow ahead. Straight ahead. Put aside the hesitation, the caveats and qualifiers and just plow ahead. Even for just one day. Let this word – this meal – this Savior – be your all and all. Don't look back.

AMEN

¹ These insights on word spaces and public reading come from an essay by Caleb Crain ("Against Camel Case," NY Times Magazine, Nov. 29, 2009, p. 18), which is itself based on a book by Paul Saenger (*Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading*, 2000).