

**Focused Faithfulness
Luke 9:51-62**

This week we will celebrate the fourth of July. The day we, as a nation, remember that two hundred and forty three years ago after the Continental Congress voted in favor of independence from Britain, delegates from the 13 colonies adopted the Declaration of Independence. And with that act the United States of America came into existence. We value our freedom and our way of life and there is much to celebrate. And yet the paradox of our nation at this time in history is that:

We have taller buildings but shorter tempers,

wider freeways, but narrower viewpoints.

We spend more, but have less. We buy more, but enjoy less.

We have bigger houses and smaller families,

more conveniences, but less time.

We have more degrees but less sense,

more knowledge, but less judgment,

more experts, yet more problems,

more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly,

laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry,

stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little,

watch TV too much, and pray too seldom.

We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.

We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We've learned how to make a living, but not a life.

We've added years to life not life to years!

We've been all the way to the moon and back,

but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor.

We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul.

We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudice.

We write more, but learn less.

We plan more, but accomplish less.

We've learned to rush, but not to wait.

We build more computers to hold more information,

to produce more copies than ever,

but we communicate less and less. (<https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2019-06-30>)

The time, my friends, has come for us focus. I read a quote this week from Pope John Paul II.

This is what he said - listen carefully:

“Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.”

Friends, freedom is not about doing what we like, what we want to do regardless of others.

True freedom comes from following Jesus Christ and what Christ calls us to is focused faithfulness.

It is interesting that often when we read our passage of scripture today we concentrate on the excuses that are given to Jesus. Probably because we understand the excuses - may have even used them ourselves! But today I want us to look carefully at Jesus' responses - his words and actions - in this passage.

We are told that Jesus “*set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” The journey had begun to the cross and Jesus was focused on his destination. So focused that he planned to take the shortest route to

Jerusalem - even though that leads him through Samaria. Jesus sent messengers ahead of him to make arrangements. They met resistance. No surprise because it was a common practice for the Samaritans to hinder any band of pilgrims who used their villages as a shortcut to Jerusalem for there was a great deal of hatred between Jews and Samaritans. For you see, my friends, prejudice and racism is not a new thing! It existed in Jesus' day too.

James and John - having just come from their experience with Jesus at the transfiguration where they saw Moses and Elijah with Jesus - wondered if Jesus wanted them to do to these Samaritans what Elijah had done so long ago. They asked Jesus "*Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?*" Jesus rebuked them - told them NO! Absolutely not!

Clearly they had forgotten that just a short time before Jesus had sent them out - along with the rest of the twelve on a mission instructing them that if they met resistance to shake the dust off their feet and leave. I wonder if Jesus reminded them of those instructions when he rebuked them. But clearly what Jesus did tell them was to move on - to focus on what was important - the journey to Jerusalem. Not to get distracted by resistance. And Jesus made it clear that as a follower of Jesus Christ there is no place for retribution. And that is a message we must keep reminding ourselves of today!

Friends, Jesus' message is one of love, grace and forgiveness. As a follower of Jesus Christ our call is offer love and grace not retaliation when we hit resistance. There are times today when we as a nation clearly seem to have forgotten this. It, of course, is not the first time in our history that we have forgotten. But friends, as followers of Jesus Christ, if we look at the crisis on the border and are not appalled at the care children and other detainees are receiving from our nation and hear people say well they asked for it by coming into our country illegally and nod our heads then we have not been listening to Christ's message. It is time for us to focus on what matters and that is people - all people

have value and we are called to respond to their needs regardless of who they are or where they have come from. And remember that Jesus said that “*whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me...*” We must not get distracted by the rhetoric and forget our calling as followers of Christ to care for those in need and especially the children. We are called to stay focused on our mission *to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves.*

Motivational speaker Tony Robbins loves racing cars. He says the most important lesson his race car instructor taught him was how to recover from a skid. The race car instructor said, “What most people do when they start to go into a skid is focus on what they fear--the wall. Instead, you must focus on where you want to go . . . The reality is that whatever you focus on you move toward.”

The instructor even had a “skid car,” a training car that was specially designed to go into a skid at the push of a button. He used it to give his clients real-world experience in the split-second decision necessary to save themselves from a skid.

Tony was driving at high speed around the track when his instructor pushed the button. As Tony went into the skid, he stared at the wall and his car began skidding toward that wall. The instructor grabbed Tony’s head and jerked his face to look in the opposite direction. He began pulling the wheel in the direction he was facing, and his car came out of the skid.

Friends, Jesus was grabbing the disciples head and turning their focus back toward what mattered. And we need someone to grab our heads today and to turn us back toward what matters.

Remember what the race car instructor said to Tony: “. . . you must focus on where you want to go.”

(Anthony Robbins, *Notes from a Friend* (New York, N.Y.: Fireside, 1995, pp. 52-54). And that is what we are called to do.

That was what Jesus was saying to the three people who said they wanted to be followers of Jesus. The first claimed he would follow Jesus anywhere. Jesus reminded him that to follow him required one to give up everything. Earlier in Luke when Jesus called the four fishermen when they responded to his call we are told *they left everything and followed Jesus.* The same thing is said about

Levi - the tax collector. When Jesus sent the twelve out on their mission he told them to take nothing with them. And just before this passage Jesus had told the disciples *“If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”* This is a lesson in what it means to deny yourself. It means staying focused on the future and looking forward not backward. Not concentrating on the material things we have but on the goal that lies ahead of us.

The second person was worried about burying his father and most scholars believe the father had not died yet but may have been elderly so he was really just stalling for time. Same thing was true with the third who wanted to go say farewell to his family. The message is that if we want to follow Jesus we must focus on where we want to go - we must keep our eyes focused on the future leaving behind the past.

The warning from Jesus was *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* In a world where very few people use a plow today we may miss the power of this message. But in Jesus’ day a farmer had to keep his eye on a distant, fixed point as he walked behind an ox or a donkey to plow a straight furrow. The only way to do the job right was to look forward and stay focused. It is the same thing that happens when we take our eyes off the road when we are driving a car. We get distracted and that is how accidents occur. We must stay focused on the road ahead and where we are going. That my friends is what we are called to do as well. We are to look forward to the opportunity for new life and growth instead of focusing on the past. We need to stop wringing our hands remembering the good old days and asking why we can’t get them back and focus on the future and what God calls us to do and be.

And Jesus was clear about what we are called to do - *“Go and proclaim the kingdom of God”* and do it now! And to do that my friends, we must have a deep trust and faith in the one we call our Savior. In the one who gave his life for us. Jesus knew when he set his face toward Jerusalem what the cost would be and yet he stayed focused on the future and continued to proclaim the kingdom of

God. And we are to do the same trusting that he has prepared the way for us into the future.

A woman recounted how on her travels to the Far East, the guide said, "Will you be good enough to give everything to me? I will take care of everything." So they gave him their luggage, but kept their small handbags. The guide spoke, "You must give everything to me." They protested that there were things that were vital to them for their trip, but the guide simply said, "They will be far safer with me, and you will be far safer without them."

After a while, they were waiting at the train station when a train pulled up. They hurriedly selected a car to board, entered the train, and found their seats. Shortly, the guide came and said, "Will you be good enough to get off of the train?" They did as the guide had requested, and then they asked him why he wanted them to get off of the train. He replied, "This is the Wrong Train. Will you be so kind as to not go before me, but come after me?"

In the course of the next few days, on a long train journey, they were wondering what provisions would be made for them when they arrived to their destination. One stranger told them that there was no place to accommodate them where they were heading. During this time, their guide remained quiet, not offering any word. However, when they arrived, they found that everything had been arranged for them. The guide quietly said to them, "Perhaps you will trust me to prepare for you ahead in the future." (<https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2019-06-30>)

Friends, if we are to be true followers of Jesus Christ we must trust that preparations have been made for us ahead in the future - the path has been set and what is required of us is focused faithfulness keeping our eyes on the future as we proclaim the kingdom of God to all the world. That is our challenge and our calling as followers of Jesus Christ. Will we set our face toward the future and follow Jesus Christ wherever he leads us?