

Excuses, Excuses
Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind Series
Proper 8C June 27, 2010
Based on Luke 9:51-62

Rev. Craig M. Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman, Texas

Excuses, excuses.

I remember hearing those words from my parents more than once when I was growing up. When my parents asked me to do something that I didn't want to do, I would come up with the mother of all excuses why I hadn't gotten the job done.

"Excuses, excuses," my parents would say.

We are all guilty of making excuses. Teachers probably hear more excuses than anyone else. I finished my homework, but I left it at home. My dog ate it. The list of excuses is endless.

Well-known author and teacher Frank McCourt thought he had heard every excuse possible until he received a note that read:

"Dear Mr. McCort, Mikey's grandmother who is eighty years of age fell down the stairs from too much coffee and I kept Mikey at home to take care of her and his baby sister so I could go to my job. Please excuse Mikey from all of his work. P.S. His grandmother is OK."

Mr. McCourt says he saw Mikey write the note at his desk, using his left hand to disguise his handwriting.

Jesus was no stranger to excuses, either. Jesus encounters three people in the gospel today. They all want to be his disciples – potential church members we might call them. They all seem sincere. But each of them has an excuse of why they can't give their heart totally to Jesus.

One comes to Jesus enthusiastically saying, "I will follow you anywhere!" Jesus makes sure that the man knows what he is getting into. Jesus warns him, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." Jesus tells the man that if you come with me, you will have no house, no belongings, no security. "Are you willing to sacrifice the comforts of life?" Jesus asks the man.

I believe it was Arthur Scammell who sang, "If you get cranky without your silk hanky, you'd better stay home!" Jesus wanted this man to seriously consider the sacrifices he would have to make to follow him. Discipleship is much more than

showing up and saying, "Sure, Jesus, count me in!" True Christian discipleship is about a total change of lifestyle and priorities.

Jesus encounters the next guy and says to him, "Come, follow me." The man seems to be open to his invitation, but sadly the man's father has just died. So he says to Jesus, "Let me go bury my father first and then I'm all yours." Shockingly, Jesus gives no hint of sympathy. "Let the dead bury their dead," Jesus says. That's a tad blunt, don't you think, Jesus? It's borderline rude.

Jesus encounters yet a third man all gung-ho about following him. All he asks is that he be given the chance to go say "goodbye" to his loved ones. To me, that sounds like a reasonable request. But yet again, Jesus fires back. "If you're going to follow me, you'll have to leave it all behind and focus solely on where God is leading us."

All three people who want to follow Jesus are told that it's all or nothing. No turning back. No excuses.

Such bluntness makes me ask, "What's gotten into Jesus? Where's all that talk about showing compassion to those who are hurting and lost? Where's the Jesus who takes the time to eat with sinners, who always meets people where they are and then and only then challenges them to greater things? Will the real Jesus please stand up?"

Something has happened in the Gospel of Luke. We've reached a crossroads. Jesus sees the cross of Calvary looming in the distance in Jerusalem and knows that he has to remain focused. Only those who are truly committed to follow him should continue on. For the road ahead isn't going to be easy. It demands total commitment and sacrifice. Even the most seemingly essential tasks – like burying our fathers and saying goodbye to our loved ones – these have to be less of a priority than our walk with Jesus. Jesus demands of these three men (and us!) uncompromising commitment. It's all or nothing.

Let me break it to you: None of us are going to make the cut to follow Jesus. We're all going to be left behind. If we are honest with ourselves, our desires for comfortable beds and time with family will ultimately outweigh our devotion to Jesus.

We might be willing to make *some* sacrifices, but a **total** sacrifice? Who are we kidding? We like to be Chiefs, not Indians. We insist on making the rules of our own lives. Sadly, rather than Jesus being our Savior and Lord – One we would follow anywhere – Jesus becomes an inconvenience to us. He gets in the way of the plans we have made for ourselves.

Isn't it telling that when Jesus beckons us to follow him in the ways of God we have to go and make so many "arrangements" before we can fully commit? If we have fully given our heart and devotion to Jesus, then there would be no reason whatsoever for us not to go with Jesus at that moment whenever and wherever he beckons.

What would our lives be like if we could truthfully say with St. Paul, "I now consider all things in my life worthless compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it as all garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him" (Philippians 3:7-9).

Jesus is always calling us to greater things, greater devotion. We tend to be held captive by things in our past, or we become all too comfortable with the way things are in the present. We have our everyday lives, and we work Jesus in whenever we can. Then Jesus shows up and calls us to consider a new way, one where Christ is at the center of everything. Christ must become the sole meaning and purpose of our everyday lives. That which does not bring glory to God and furthers Christ's kingdom must be cast aside. This is the kind of devotion Christ asks of us this day.

So let's face it: we're all going to be left behind. None of us is going to make the cut. Just like the three men in the gospel today, we've already come up with a long list of excuses why we can't follow Jesus at this point in time. We are reluctant to make the kind of total commitment Jesus is asking of us. It doesn't fit into our life plan. Whether it be with our time, our talent, or our treasure, we might we willing to offer a small portion of it, but to *totally* release our schedules and our pocketbooks to Jesus, we'll get back to you on that one.

We are left asking the question, "Is there anyone – anybody at all – who is willing to make that kind of total commitment?" And in asking that question, we get to the Good News of this Scripture.

"Is there anyone who is willing to surrender everything, to give his whole life fully and completely to God for the sake of God's kingdom?" Of course, the answer to that question is, "Yes, there is someone – but only one – willing to give up his whole life!" His name is Jesus Christ.

Jesus was willing to surrender everything in order to fully follow God's will for his life. Jesus left his immediate family in order to create a new family – the family of God. Jesus gave up the comforts of home in order to preach to all people the joy of knowing God's comforting love.

Think about it: Jesus was born in a borrowed manger and buried in a borrowed tomb. Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey, and ate his Last Supper in a borrowed Upper Room. Indeed, as the gospel said, he had no place to lay his head. In fact, the only place Jesus ultimately had to rest his head was on the Cross of Calvary.

That sacrificial act of Jesus giving his life for us on the cross drastically changes the rules of engagement. It becomes the means of grace that we need to be found worthy to be a follower of Christ. We don't become worthy by saying "Yes" to Jesus. Rather, we become worthy because Jesus has said "Yes" to us. "You did not choose me," Jesus says in the 15th chapter of John, "but I chose you."

On the cross, Jesus does what is necessary for us to be found fit for God's kingdom. Instead of us having to choose Jesus, Jesus chooses us. Instead of waiting for us to have all the right answers, God takes matters into his own hands and answers all the questions for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We all too often assume that Jesus tells the men in the gospel today, "Your faith is not strong enough to follow me yet. Go work on that, and then we'll talk." I don't think that's what Jesus says at all. That kind of language is what Lutherans call "works righteousness," that we have to do all the right things and say all the right words in order for Jesus to love and accept us.

What Jesus actually says is, "I know that you aren't willing to fully surrender your life to God, and so I will surrender my life for you." The Gospel today begins by stating that Jesus "resolutely set out for Jerusalem," He set his eyes on the Cross. Jesus is determined to do whatever is necessary for us to be reconciled to God because he knows that on our own, we will not find our way.

Our self-centered lives will hinder us from experiencing all that God has in store for us. So Jesus resolutely places "his hands to the plow and doesn't look back." It's an act of self-giving love. What we couldn't bring ourselves to do, Jesus does for us.

So whether or not we have all the right answers to Jesus' questions is not the issue. Whether we are willing to entrust our lives to the saving grace of God is. The Bible is clear: salvation is a free gift from God. Nothing we do or say earns us our place among the saints of God. The only thing that makes us right in the eyes of God is the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Entrusting our lives to that one, grace-filled act is the key to experiencing God's salvation. Ultimately, believing that Christ's death on the Cross has something to do with our lives makes us worthy of our name "Child of God."

Let's make sure we have our focus in the right place. The focus should never be on us. Our eyes should always be looking to the cross of Jesus. On that cross, Jesus satisfies the debt of all of our self-centered ways.

On that cross, the gift of salvation is freely offered not to those who have all the right answers, but to those who entrust their sinful lives into the dying arms of the sinless Jesus. The cross of Jesus is God's undeniable "Yes" to us!

Knowing that God's has already spoken his divine "Yes" upon us frees us from always having to get things right and to simply be the gifted child of God we were created to be in the waters of Holy Baptism. Knowing that our salvation has already been secured, we are freed to focus our attention on others who need a reminder of God's incredible love. Because of what Christ has done for us upon the cross, we are freed to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, comfort the grieving. We are freed to love and serve those we encounter in our daily lives. Our reaching out to others becomes our "Thank You" to Christ for all he has done for us. Because God has said "Yes" to us, let us choose to say "Yes" to others.

May it be so in your life and in mine. Amen