

**Sermon**  
**St. Mary's Nanoose**  
**June 26, 2016.**  
**Luke 9:51-62 (excuses not to follow)**

Excuses. How many excuses did Jesus hear in his short lifetime? Over and over he hears, "Yes, I'll follow you but *first* let me ....." and then there are a litany of reasons to hesitate or put off following Jesus.

In this passage we hear two excuses: one disciple wants to go and say goodbye to his family first; the second one needs to bury his father first. Jesus' response to this second excuse can sound harsh to us but really it's his way of saying – "Let the past be the past; it's time to move on." Jesus is making the point that it's time to choose life over death. And there's some urgency for him, and for us. After all, this is the time in Jesus' life when his face was set toward Jerusalem. He was walking towards his death - while offering us life at the same time. The disciples didn't get it; and all these hundreds of years later, we mostly don't, either.

In the first line from the reading from Galatians this morning we heard, 'For freedom, Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.' Here's the good news! We have been set free to follow Jesus. We're no longer constrained under a yoke – in all the different ways we are slaves. Yet we do not claim that freedom. We're not an ox or donkey who cannot choose. We are created in the image and likeness of God. We *can* choose to

live into the divine life. Like the disciples in Jesus' day, we are called into this new life but for some reason we resist. Even when we know it's what we want, what would be good for us, we resist. Why do we resist?

Maybe because it's scary to change. We're afraid to let go of the past. We are creatures of habit. We want to know where we're going to lay our head at night. What we're going to eat. Who is going to be our neighbour. Even when life is unpleasant or we're in pain, often we prefer what's familiar over what is better, and even best, for us. It's so hard for us to change.

But as we hear today, change is exactly what we're invited into. To follow Jesus into new life; the life of abundance and freedom. When we cling to the past, we literally turn our back on God. Listen. Our Gospel reading ends with these words:

“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’ ”

Let's have a closer look at this plowing imagery.

*Illustration using someone from the congregation to try and “plow” a straight line while turning to face where they have come from (the past) = impossible!*

When we are stuck in the past, we *back into* the future, moving without clarity and purpose, without a vision of the life God intends for us. There are many things that keep us fixated on the past: guilt,

blame, regret, suffering, longing, fear. All very real things. Yet this image of plowing illustrates for us that our past cannot and will not set us free to move ahead with purpose and clarity. We cannot determine how life will unfold. We cannot manufacture life and love. Only God can and does. And the love of God will carry and hold us. We have to trust. Following the path that Jesus makes for us, the narrow way, is how we will walk and grow into free people. Like so much of his teachings, this one feels counter intuitive. Our impulse is to choose what is familiar, what has worked in the past. It's our past has brought us to this moment. It is our past that is the compost in the field. But the past is past. And the present moment is what's pregnant with new life. It's all about choice. Do we want to stumble backwards or walk forward, keeping our eyes on the back of the man whose commitment is to lead us to freedom?

Several decades ago I read an amazing story in the Reader's Digest while waiting in a doctor's office. The author, a woman, started off by describing her marriage as pretty mediocre. Her husband was sarcastic, impatient, prone to anger and quite critical of her. He never went out of his way to acknowledge her, or even to be pleasant. And then one day he changed. He simply changed. He started expressing his appreciation for her meals, for doing his laundry, for how cozy their home was, how thoughtful and kind she was. She was taken by surprise and regarded him suspiciously. This went on for weeks. She kept up her guard, expecting him to revert to his old, cranky ways. He

never did. He was a changed man. He fixed things around the house without being asked, he started taking her out on dates. He started to tell her how much he loved her. And after a while, she relaxed and started to enjoy this new man she found herself living with. Their marriage became a source of joy. The man never did tell his wife what made him change. Even when she asked. He just would apologize for the way he had been. It was as if they had gone back in time to when they were first married. And that was the story. That story had a big impact on me. It inspired me; and it made me wonder what had made the man change.

Most of us don't change dramatically like that. Most of us change gradually over time. Like the author of the short story who distrusted her husband for the longest while, most of us take time to trust God who was, is and will be consistently loving and present. We have to learn how to relax into God's loving embrace.

Traveling is another way to practice following and trusting. We get out of the ruts of our daily life and can be willing to take risks and venture into new worlds.

Last summer Jim and I traveled to the country of his ancestors – Ireland. On the plane trip over, we decided that the theme of this trip would be “trust.” And over and over again during the five weeks we were in that glorious country, we would remind each other, “trust” when we got frustrated, scared or worried.

Let me give you a few examples from our trip:

Jim came up with the idea that we would walk the Grand Canal which spans the country from east to west - 131 kms. We asked people about doing this and the answers were vague and encouraging at the same time. "I'm sure it will be grand," the tourist agent told us. "Will there be places to stay on the Canal?" we asked. "Oh sure, sure," was the answer. We like to think positively as well so took this as a good omen.

And so we headed by bus to get to Shannon Harbour, where the tow path began. Shannon Harbour. Wouldn't you think that Shannon Harbour would be in the city of Shannon? Just like the Victoria Harbour is in Victoria? Well, when we arrived in a little town outside Shannon, it quickly became apparent that Shannon Harbour was a distinctly different town, in the opposite direction of where we now were. "Trust, Trust," we reminded each other. Yvonne, the host of our B&B came and picked us up from the bus station, a lively friendly woman. Back at her home we had tea with her and her friend Doreen who was visiting her. After the preliminary chit chat, they asked where we were off to the next day.

"Shannon Harbour," we said. The two women looked at each other and burst out laughing. "Now just how are you going to go about getting there?" Doreen asked. "Bus," we replied. "There'll be no bus going into Shannon Harbour" our host replied. The post only goes in once a week. "Trust, trust" our eyes said as we exchanged looks. "Oh well, we'll just have to change our plans," we announced.

Later that evening, Doreen casually said, "You know, I'm going home in the morning and it's not far out of my way to take you into Shannon Harbour." We couldn't believe our good fortune. So the next day we piled into the car with Doreen and discovered a good time later that Shannon Harbour wasn't exactly on Doreen's way at all. But the ride there was full of laughs and stories.

The road in Shannon Harbour was one lane flanked by 10 foot high hedges and when we arrived there was no one and nothing much there except boats on the Canal. And so we figured out which way was east and we started out along the tow path. We were on our way. And we were euphoric. "Trust, trust."

What we discovered was that there are no places to speak of, to stay along the Grand Canal. When trucking took over from shipping, the towns moved away from the Canal to string themselves along the motor ways. And so we had to walk a good 30km most days to find lodging.

One day, after walking *more* than 30km, we were absolutely beat. I kept hoping to see signs of Edenderry, the town we were headed for in the distance. But after two hours of strangers telling us "you're almost there," we were still looking at miles of fields and farm houses. Nearing a bridge, I spotted a man putting his fishing gear into his car and called across, "How far to Edenderry?" He motioned for us to come over the bridge. At this point I dreaded any extra steps but across we went. "Where are you going?" We told him, "A B&B in Edenderry." He seemed impatient. "I know that, but which one?" "The

Fisherman's Rest." "Ahhh," he said, "That Rita's place. Tell you what," he continued, "give me your packs and I'll take them there for you, and you can walk the rest of the way without them." I stared at him. "You don't trust me," he said. "Call Rita and let her know that Barney's bringing your bags." But it wasn't that we didn't trust him, we were simply astounded and delighted by the gift being offered.

The next hour and a bit flew by as we walked on light feet into Edenderry. And sure enough, there were our bags by our beds.

"Trust, trust!!"

Jesus calls us to trust and follow. We rebellious people resist what is best for us. Yet sometimes, we do manage to change, and to step out not knowing what the future holds, or where we'll next lay our heads. And other times, life is changed for us through death, illness, or relocation or betrayal, or any number of things, and we're thrust into the unknown. But if we only but raise our eyes, we will see that we are being led, by one who might get impatient sometimes but whose ultimate nature is love and compassion - a God who only wants for our freedom.

And so, all you who are weary, all you who are hungry, all you who yearn for freedom, come this morning to the table of plenty, come be nourished for the journey ahead, knowing that while we may turn our backs from time to time, our God never turns away from us.

Amen.