

Keeping Our Options Open

Luke 9:57-62

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This is one of those scriptures that raise all kinds of questions....particularly because Jesus says some things that seem, well, out of character. And context certainly has something to do with the tone of Jesus's words. You see, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. On some level, Jesus must have known what was ahead...the opposition, the conflict, the cruelty that awaited him. And on his way, Jesus meets three people who are potential candidates for the Jesus team. But Jesus is in no mood for dilly dallying around.

The first man says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go!" And Jesus replies, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

To candidate number two Jesus says, "Follow me." The man responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus replies, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Candidate number three says to Jesus, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus replies using a farmer's analogy, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

These are odd responses from Jesus, don't you think? What *is* going on here?"

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Let's start with the candidate behind door number two, the one whom Jesus invites to follow him but the man replies that he wants to go first and bury his father. Jesus surprisingly responds, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom..."

What is your reaction when you hear this? I can tell you that the first time I heard this I thought, "Really, Jesus? I mean, the guy has a dead father and you won't give him permission to go home and bury him? And the other poor soul just wants to say good bye to his family."

It doesn't sound like the Jesus I know! The Jesus I know is the Jesus on the cross who tells one of his disciples to take care of his mother when he is gone and the Jesus whose compassionate heart heals those who are suffering. So something else is going on here.... and what is going on here with candidate number two is that Jesus uses a pun...and hyperbole to make a point. "Let the spiritually dead bury the others who are spiritually dead, but you come and proclaim the kingdom."

Are you with me? What Jesus is doing here, I believe, is challenging those who procrastinate and make excuses along the spiritual highway. The issue is not about the man's dead father, or his desire to be a good son and tend to the burial. The issue is procrastination and excuses which Jesus sees right through.

Have you ever had someone in your life that just seemed to offer a library full of excuses for why they can't do something? And guess what? Most of the time the excuses are seemingly good and reasonable. But after a while you begin to detect a pattern. I mean this person has presented one hundred really, excellent excuses.

My computer crashed. I got stuck in traffic. My schedule is crazy. I needed to.....

Jesus says "Follow me."

But suppose we're just not ready to make that kind of commitment. So we look for a good sounding reasons as an out. Do you know what I'm talking about?

I've heard them all:

The church is full of hypocrites.

Sunday is my only day I can spend with family.

We are so busy.

Christians are homophobic or too political or not political enough or fill in the blank with the reason du jour.

But no one has ever said to me, "God is just not that important to me."

From a religious musical comes a song titled, *Use Me, O Lord*. It goes like this:

*As soon as I'm out of college,
And pay all the debts I've carried;
As soon as I've done my Army stint,
As soon as I've gotten married;*

*I want you to use me, Oh Lord,
Use me, Oh Lord,
But not just now...*

*As soon as I get promoted,
As soon as the house is built,
As soon as my psychiatrist
Says that I'm free of guilt;*

*I want you to use me, Oh Lord,
Use me, Oh Lord,
But not just now...*

The issue in these encounters between Jesus and the second and third would-be disciples is not about attending a father's funeral or saying good bye to the family. No. Jesus knows these guys are trying to keep their options open, are reluctant to commit...and Jesus refuses to let them get away with it. My guess is that Jesus would have much preferred something honest: "Jesus, the truth is I just don't know if I can do it, if I can follow you to Jerusalem, to the kind of loving, forgiving, self-denying life that you call for."

That's honest.

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I read a fascinating article recently by Heide Halvorson, a psychologist who teaches in the Columbia Business School. She starts her article with this interesting question: "Given the choice would you prefer to make an iron-clad, no-turning-back decision, or one you could back out of if you needed to?"

Well, that seems to be a no brainer! Of course you would keep your options open. Halvorson says that something really counter intuitive goes on here.

She says most of us believe that keeping our options open is the way to go. So we delay in declaring a major, or date for years before getting married, or buy a product from a store that has a guaranteed return policy or hire employees on a temporary basis. That way we are keeping our options open.

But guess what? According to Harvard psychologist Dan Gilbert, the research shows that reversible decisions, the keep-your-options-open decisions, lead to lower levels of life satisfaction. In other words, we are significantly less happy with our choices when we believe we can back out of them. Really?

Why? Because once we make a final, no-turning-back decision, something psychological happens in us; that we have an uncanny ability to make ourselves feel good and right about our decisions. In other words, once we've committed to a course of action, we stop thinking about the alternatives and all the doubting and the "what ifs" that bring us anxiety and stress.

It is like having choices between two colleges, or two job offers, or two houses to buy or any decision with choices. I mean we make our pro and con lists but once you make a decision...boom. We are in. Almost every choice in our life has a downside but the key to happiness, according to Gilbert, is to dwell as little as possible on the downside.

When we keep our options open, we can't stop thinking of the downside....where we are still trying to figure out if we made the right choice. Then ...doubt, stress, anxiety, unrest.

But here is the kicker: It is not just about happiness! The research shows that when we live in the realm of the reversible decisions, of keeping our options open, then we also perform poorly. Why? When our mind is burdened and distracted with the "why ifs," we don't have the cognitive resources to devote ourselves fully to whatever we are actually doing.

Halverson says living in a world where we are constantly keeping our options open is a really, really bad idea. This, apparently, is what Jesus thought too.

And if you are a golfer, then you know that good golfers and good golf teachers say: “Get committed to the shot.” If you are not committed, but have doubts and indecision swirling around, your swing will be awful. I know! But when you get committed to the shot, can see it in your mind, then it frees up your body to do it.

So the golf gurus say, “Get committed and hit it!”

So I am thinking, what are the values in my life that are so important that I will commit to keep them?

When it comes to our spiritual lives, how many times have we dilly dallied and said, “One of these days I’m going to…” Fill in the blank — Daily devotions; More attention to prayer; A serious Bible study; Volunteer work; Making worship a priority; A real generous financial commitment; One of these days I am going to teach or sing or serve or lead.

One of these days…

“Let the dead bury their own dead…you come and proclaim the kingdom…”

Have you ever heard someone apologize but they ended their apology with a *but*? Any time we end a confession or an apology with a *but*, then we are in essence denying our full responsibility for our actions.

“I’m sorry I said that, but I never would have if you hadn’t behaved the way you did.”

I am so sorry I _____ (fill in the blank) but I am so stressed out with my _____ (fill in the blank).

An apology with a *but* is not an apology — but an excuse.

I remember what Scott Peck said in *The Road Less Traveled*, a book that was so important for me in my thirties “...We must accept responsibility for a problem before we can solve it. We cannot solve a problem by saying ‘It is not my problem.’ I can solve a problem only when I say ‘This is my problem and it’s up to me to solve it.’ Not — ‘This was caused by other people or by social circumstances beyond my control...’”ⁱ

Recovering alcoholics teach us this again and again. Accepting responsibility is what makes Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve step programs so successful. Our recovery may not be from alcohol, but we are all addicted to something. Moving forward begins with our willingness to stop denying and accepting our responsibility.

“Follow me,” Jesus said. “Yes, Jesus, but...”

Jesus demands that we see our excuses for what they are.

The Greatest Generation was famous for their commitment to the value of commitment. Those of us who have followed.... Baby Boomers, Gen-xers, and Millennials have struggled by comparison. Commitments are hard for us because they require closing our options, perseverance, strength, and character when the road gets difficult. We know that from such simple things as dieting. I can't tell you how many times I have started a diet with the idea that I will just cut back a little...and six weeks later the pants are just as tight! Why? Because I have *not* been wholeheartedly committed to it.

How many times have we said the same about our family budgets — that we would spend less and save more — but we had no real plan. So six months later we find ourselves in the same financial mess because we have not really been committed to it.

Which is true for our spiritual lives.

I read about a guy who committed to making all A's in his course work. But at the semester's end, the report card was mediocre. Yes, he was committed to making A's but he was not committed to the process of what it takes....studying, reading, asking questions, taking notes, asking for help, digging deeper, learning, and all that it takes to become an excellent student.

Follow me, Jesus says. No dilly dallying. No excuses.

Sources

ⁱ Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, Simon and Schuster, 1978, pp. 32-33

“Why Keeping Your Options Open is a Really, Really, Bad Idea,” by Heide Halvorson, *FastCompany.com*, 5/7/11