

## CONDITIONAL DISCIPLESHIP

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Matthew 8:18-22

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In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is on the move. He is on the road moving through the towns and villages of Galilee. Everywhere he goes, he is teaching and healing. Everywhere he goes, crowds gather around him. There is a sense of excitement in the air. After all, it was not often that the people in towns and villages were visited by someone so exceptional. As the people gather around Jesus, they are impressed by what he has to say and amazed by what he can do. Some are so inspired that they feel compelled to respond. So, they approach Jesus, and in their enthusiasm, they blurt out something along the lines of, "*I will follow you wherever you go*" (Matthew 18:19). Their enthusiasm was real; their intentions were good. But underneath their obvious excitement about Jesus were conditions – conditions that Jesus seemed to know about.

The first man to approach Jesus was a scribe. As a scribe he was an educated man who held a position of respect in the community. To this first man, Jesus responded, "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*" (Matthew 18:20). In other words, "Before you follow me, you need to count the cost." There are no false pretenses here. Jesus makes it clear that the demands of being a disciple are significant, and the cost can be high. You can't come and say you want to follow me if you have no intention of giving up any of the comforts and perks, the conveniences and pleasures of your present life.

Over the forty years I have been a pastor and in the six churches I have served during those years, I have been discouraged at times by the fact that many church members seem to think church membership need not make much if any difference in their lives. Whenever I first started working at a church over the years, including this one, I always hoped to meet every member; I hoped that a majority of members would not be faceless names in a church directory, but would instead be passionate followers of Jesus Christ who are excited about being participants in Christ's ministry in the world and so at the very least show up once in a while even if not weekly. Of course, hope and reality are often two very different experiences in this life.

Most Sundays, I'm happy if church members as well as a few guests simply show up because showing up is certainly an indicator that worship and Christian community are priorities. By his own example, Jesus prioritized both. And yet, even though your showing up makes me happy, that in and of itself is not enough for Jesus. Yes, showing up is important, but it is only a first step. Being a follower of Jesus Christ means daily, life-long steps of commitment and sacrifice.

It is not possible to be a disciple and for there to be no noticeable impact on our daily choices, priorities and activities. It is not possible to follow Jesus and opt out of sacrifice. When Jesus responds to that first man in our Gospel

lesson, he is confronting the common misconception that we can separate our love of God from faithful living. Our love and admiration of Jesus cannot be separated from the personal sacrifices and life changes that occur when following Jesus.

Unlike the first man in our Gospel lesson, the second man who approached Jesus appears to be an everyday kind of guy which means he is not wealthy and likely uneducated like the vast majority of people in that day. But like most people, he has family responsibilities. To this second man who wants to bury his father before following, Jesus responds with words that seem harsh to our ears, even offensive. Jesus says, "*Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead*" (Matthew 8:22). When trying to understand Jesus' response, it's important to know that in all likelihood the man's father had not recently died and neither was he close to death. What the man is saying is, "I will follow you sometime in the future after my father has died."

You see, a man in those days was expected to care for his parents. Doing so was part of the intent of the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment that said, "honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12). However, even if his parents were elderly and those responsibilities would likely end in a few short years, then there would always be other responsibilities, like his wife, children, grandchildren. Eventually his own age and health would be the excuses that would prevent him from following Jesus. The point Jesus is making with this second man is that you can't follow me if you aren't willing to respond to the stirrings in your heart right now for there will always be reasons why a particular moment is not a good one.

I know Jesus is right when it comes to excuses, because I have heard dozens of them over the years. I would love to share with you some of the excuses I've heard but it would take way too long and this is a Communion Sunday. Suffice it to say that most of the excuses are simply ones that reveal a lack of willingness to be inconvenienced, to reprioritize and to sacrifice. Certainly, there are legitimate excuses – crisis, illness related issues – that keep us away from worship and service in Christ's name. But what does it say about our willingness to follow Jesus when there most always seems to be a reason why we can't? Following Jesus does not mean ignoring all our other responsibilities. Being irresponsible is clearly not the example Jesus set for us. However, following Jesus does mean prioritizing our discipleship responsibilities amidst all our other responsibilities.

Psychologists tell us that every time we have a good idea, or an inspired feeling and we do not act on it, it becomes less and less likely that we will ever act on it. For example, how often have you felt like you should call someone, or perhaps write a note of sympathy or thanks, but you don't get around to it? How often have you said, "I really need to sign-up and help with the Cleveland Food Bank," but it never happens? Well, the longer you put it off, the less likely you will ever do it. Jesus challenges us to drop our excuses and to act right away when our hearts are stirred. Jesus challenges us to know what's

most important in this life and to make room for following him amid our responsibilities.

It was a 99 degree day when a 10-month old baby girl was accidentally locked inside a parked car by her aunt. Frantically, the mother and aunt ran around the car in near hysteria, while a neighbor attempted to unlock the car with a clothes hanger. On a hot day like that it was not long before the infant was showing signs of distress. It had become a life-or-death situation when a man by the name of Fred arrived on the scene. He immediately grabbed a hammer from his truck and smashed the back window of the car so that he could pull out the baby. Do you think Fred was heralded a hero? Not according to the infant's aunt who owned the car and who was quite upset that he broke her window. But as far as Fred was concerned it was not that the window was unimportant, it's that the baby was more important.

Certainly, each of us have important responsibilities to attend to in our daily lives, and we cannot, we should not ignore those responsibilities, and yet Jesus insists that we prioritize him amidst those other responsibilities. Yes, we should love and support our families. No, it's not wrong to have more than what's needed to satisfy our very basic needs. But it's not okay to lose sight of what's most important; it's not okay to use our personal preferences, conditions and timing as excuses not to follow Jesus.

Resetting priorities, forgiving, sacrificing, loving people we don't like – following Jesus means all these things. Sometimes it is something as small as the choice between sleeping in or offering God our time and attention and praise through worship. Sometimes the choice is between a Saturday at home or participating in an outreach ministry. Sometimes it's between stopping by a store to pick up what we need or picking up what's needed to make personal dignity kits for those suffering from some crisis. Sometimes it's between splurging on a new purchase or supporting a new mission project. Sometimes it's the choice between an afternoon at home or visiting one of our church shut-ins or perhaps a neighbor you know is not well. Sometimes it's the choice between volunteering for Vacation Bible school or having five evenings free to relax. Sometimes it's the choice between whether we are going to have a positive or a negative attitude, whether we are going to tear down or build up the people around us, whether we are going to let go of resentments or carry them around with us like a ball and chain. And sometimes, the cost of discipleship is much greater than any of these.

We are each here this morning because, in one way or another, we have said to Jesus, "Yes, I will follow!" Sometimes we are faithful, sometimes we are not so much. Sometimes the conditions we set prevent us from accomplishing what Jesus is calling us to. But despite the personal conditions we often place upon our discipleship as Christians, I still think it's good that you chose to be here today, because being here means you have placed yourself in a place to know and hear God. You have placed yourself in a place to be challenged and instructed – a place to examine yourself and perhaps even submit your life more fully to Christ's call. Amidst the extending of his

hand and his invitation to go with him, today Jesus reminds you and me to let go of the excuses that prevent us from following him whole-heartedly.

I know you will leave this time of worship and return to your everyday life tempted to hold on to your personal list of conditions. Jesus knows he is demanding, and he knows it's not easy to follow him. But here in this place, we seek forgiveness for our failures, and we renew our determination to be faithful disciples. The good news is that when Jesus asks us to make tough choices, he doesn't just leave us hanging out there all by ourselves. Not only has Jesus gone before us, but he also walks beside us as we confront the hesitations of our conditions, and as we make what are sometimes inconvenient, sacrificial choices to follow him.

So, as we come this day to eat the broken bread of Christ's body, and to drink the poured-out blood of Christ's sacrifice, let us renew our commitment to follow Jesus. Specifically, I invite you to seek the Lord's help as you let go of your conditional discipleship and commit yourself fully to the One who chose to set no conditions on his love and willingness to sacrifice for you. So come, you are all invited to a Holy Communion experience with Christ your Lord.