

Sermon for Okuli

Luke 9:57-62



“⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”⁶⁰And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”⁶¹Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Here comes someone who wants to follow Jesus. What in the world could be more beautiful? What joy awakens in each of us when someone from outside comes and says, “I want to become a Christian. I want to be baptized.” We meet such a person in today’s Gospel. He wanted to follow Jesus. He didn’t just want to be baptized quickly and then go on his way but rather give his whole life to Him. He wanted to go wherever Jesus went. In other words, he wanted to give everything without limits.

What happens next surprises us so that we instinctively look at Jesus with a question mark over our heads, asking, “Jesus, do you really mean that? Or did you have something else in mind?” Jesus, who was otherwise open to tax collectors and sinners, who opened His arms even to the smallest children, draws the line here and seems to ask the one who wants to give up everything, “Are you really serious?” He does this by pointing out that foxes have their dens and birds have their nests, but the Son of Man does not. This was a common saying in Jesus’ time, which referred to the homelessness of people in general, but particularly to the fact that Jesus Himself had become human. Therefore, like everyone else, He had no heavenly island where He could retreat for rest and relaxation. He remains a stranger in the world and does not want to make Himself at home in it. Those who want to follow Jesus should not only know this but also expect that they will repeatedly be challenged to do that which opposes their own hearts. It is also important to note that Jesus does not expect us to copy Him in every respect. Not every Christian should or must leave their family! For some, the path of discipleship may consist of taking up the heavy burden and returning to where God has already placed them. But discipleship, as Jesus makes clear, does not come cheap. Sometimes, we must endure hardships for the sake of the gospel. Or, as Philippians says: “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty.” (Philippians 4:12 ESV)

I wonder if we, in the comfortable church of Europe, have forgotten what it means to follow Jesus. Repeatedly we hear, “The main thing is that I’m doing well!” “The main thing is that I feel good!” and “Please, Christian worship should not be a burden. One hour a week is the most we can handle.” But Jesus’ words are even more radical than that. When He spoke these words, He was already on His way to Jerusalem where He would be crucified. It was perfectly clear to Jesus that His goal was not to be found in this world. Even though no disciple and no Christian can follow Jesus’ path to its conclusion on the cross, even Jesus’ disciples will not reach their goal in this world.

As long as we live here on earth, we Christians will be restless and anxious because we are not at home here. The Christian philosopher Kierkegaard quoted this very text in his critique of the Church, stating that he found a Church that had made itself comfortable in the world. On this path,

the Church is willing to do anything to appear interesting to the world again. According to Kierkegaard, such a church has chosen the broad path. With the goal of saving the world, it has itself become worldly and paradoxically finds that the more it merges with the world, the less interesting it becomes to the world.

Jesus gives Himself to us unconditionally. Yet His questions make it clear that He does not want us to take this for granted. His words unsettle us. They challenge us. They question every path we choose and challenge us to be high and low, full and hungry, in want and in abundance. We are not to live as we have always imagined, but to live according to the call that Jesus gives us here and now.

The second man in our story is the exact opposite. He did not volunteer to be a disciple. He was called by Jesus Himself. He did not seem to be fundamentally opposed to discipleship but had only one act of piety to first perform: he had to bury his father. At that time, this rite was one of the most important acts of love a person could do. Here too, Jesus turns everything upside down by saying, "Let the dead bury their dead." This sentence has a harsh, almost aggressive tone. We get a small hint of this when we observe how Jesus reacts at funerals. In the various places He is present during times of mourning and death, He acts in notable ways. When He stands at the tomb of Lazarus, He is even seized by anger. John writes that, "He was indignant in spirit." If we look closer, we can understand why Jesus reacts this way to death. Death and funeral rituals are expressions of complete hopelessness. With death, everything is truly over. Jesus is the exact opposite: He is life itself! That is why everything in Him rebels when He encounters death.

Anyone who understands that Jesus is the Life does not say, "Let me take one more day off with death!" No, those who want to live with Jesus live immediately. Jesus gives them no opportunity to concern themselves with death again. Instead, they are given a task for life: "But you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God!"

In the third scene, following Jesus also begins with a farewell. The new disciple wants (understandably) to say goodbye to his friends and family. Here, too, the answer is: "Denied." Here, too, we must not dwell on family. Jesus does not want to speak disparagingly about friends or family. It's just an example. It could just have easily been something else. One person must give up a successful career; another must break from addiction. The chain smoker is not allowed a final farewell cigarette. A radical break is required, in fact, immediately. But here, too, we should not get hung up on the external issue. It is really about where we fix our eyes. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God," says Jesus. This sentence makes it clear: Those who want to follow Jesus are completely taken by Him. Those who have found Jesus only look ahead. There is no need to tell them what they are losing or giving up. It goes without saying that as followers of Jesus, they will receive a thousand times more than they could ever give up.

Jesus challenges us three times. Three times He shows us that there are situations where it is all or nothing. Three times we must dare to see that we suddenly put everything on the line for Jesus' sake. Three times, Jesus shows us the bright light on the horizon. It's about everything He wants to give us, and about everything He has already given us.

Yes, Jesus is entirely serious. He walked the road to Jerusalem and to the cross so that we might be entirely freed from sin and have a future that can be taken seriously.

Amen.