**The Problem of Priorities** June 26, 2022

You may remember a popular self-help book by Stephen R. Covey called The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. First published in 1989, the book sets forth Covey’s “true north” principles that, if ingrained as habits, can help people progress from dependence to independence, and ultimately, to interdependence.

#3 on Covey’s habit list is “Put first things first.” This habit is described as distinguishing between what is important and what is urgent. It requires us to understand what we truly value and what is often a knee-jerk reaction to demands placed on us.

The idea of prioritizing and as Covey says, “keeping the main thing the main thing” is hard for most people, and Jesus’ disciples and early followers were no different than us. We’ll see Jesus’ followers wrestling with their desires to **be right**, to **do good**, and to **be thought of as good** by their culture. Let’s read our sermon text for today found in Luke 9:51-62.

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.*

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And 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.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” And Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” And Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

The passage has two separate stories: The first story, which we’ll title How to Handle Conflict, is about the disciples’ reaction to the Samaritan village’s unwillingness to welcome Jesus. The second story, which we’ll call Getting Priorities Right, is about people struggling to understand how to love God and love others as part of following Jesus.

ASK: What is conflict? What do you think? (Answers from audience)

**conflict**

 a situation in which people, groups or countries disagree strongly or are involved in a serious argument

Oxford Learners Dictionary

What is the conflict in this scene?

Jesus & the disciples want to pass through the Samaritan village on their way to Jerusalem. They are not welcomed.

**Historical background:**

In King David’s time Israel was split into 2 kingdoms. The northern part was still called Israel and the southern kingdom was Judah. Both Israel and Judah were eventually conquered by invaders and the people were taken captive to foreign lands.

Samaria was what was left of the northern kingdom, as the invaders left a few poor people in the land and took the rest captive to Assyria. These Samaritans had their own sacred scriptures (a version of the Pentateuch) and held worship in a temple on Mount Gerizim. If we remember Jesus’ conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-26), she asked why the Jews insisted that Jerusalem was the only place for true worship. We can surmise that the Samaritans saw Jesus’ intention to travel to Jerusalem as another slight in their long history of being treated as second-class worshippers by the Jews.

Let’s recap the situation in our passage: Jesus sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his visit. Jesus is focused on getting to Jerusalem. Let’s imagine what their dialogue might have been, but in modern language.

*Disciples:* Jesus is coming to your town on the way to Jerusalem, and he sent us to get things ready. [We don’t know if he wanted to have a meeting with them or stay overnight or both.]

*Samaritans:* You guys are heading to Jerusalem to worship. What’s wrong with worshipping here? Are we not good enough for you? Get lost! We don’t want you here.

*James & John* (called “the sons of thunder”) said to Jesus; “Can you believe this? It’s outrageous. They’re not extending hospitality like they should. Let’s use some of your power to call down fire from heaven and blast them all.”

We might first think that the disciples were overreacting and that we would never do anything like that. But how many times have we argued in person, or on Facebook or social media, or through some other means attempting to justify our opinion as being truth on any number of topics?

**If we consider how we are often more interested in being right than being loving, we probably will realize our methods of handling conflicting views are not that much different than the disciples.** In fact, we’ve seen it throughout the history of Christianity.

 “Triumphalism” is the self-righteous idea that your doctrines, beliefs, or culture is right and everyone else is wrong and it’s too often seen in Christianity. **Well-meaning Christians often portray that everyone who disagrees or believes differently is wrong.** Christian history, from the Crusades through the Spanish Inquisition and beyond, shows some Christians resorting to violence – just like those we often condemn – when people refuse to believe our “good news.”

When we find ourselves focusing on how wrong everybody else is and how right we are, we must ask ourselves, **“What am I making a higher priority? Am I following Jesus by loving my neighbor as myself? Or is my opinion more important?”**

This is a hard thing! We all love our own opinions, don’t we? We can get pretty excited about them and passionate about convincing others that we are right and they’re wrong, or at least misinformed or ignorant.

A few weeks ago Craig and I visited a Dutch store on Vancouver Island. Of course, I am proud of my Dutch heritage, despite a few small, insignificant personality traits commonly exhibited by those of Dutch descent. I had some good laugh when I saw these t-shirts on display, and I took some photos to share with our kids and now you.

[Show photos]

How does Jesus handle the conflict in today’s passage? Surprisingly, instead of punishing the local Samaritans for being inhospitable, Jesus rebukes the disciples: “Get a grip, James & John! Let’s just move on. Don’t overreact. Don’t blow people up when they don’t agree with you. Keep your mind on the goal.” Or as Steven Covey would say, “Keep the main thing the main thing.” This is good advice for all of us!

Not only was Jesus teaching the disciples how to properly handle conflict (with grace and patience, not fire from heaven), but he also maintained his focused intention – to head toward Jerusalem to accomplish his mission. Jesus knew his priority, and he refused to be sidetracked by the disciples’ desire for revenge.

There is also an important lesson here about not rejecting and condemning those who don’t believe as we do. Just as Jesus accepted the Samaritan’s decision and unbelief, sometimes we need to just move on. Be respectful and loving. God’s got this! God’s got them!

**Story #2 – Getting Priorities Right**

The second story involves Jesus’ interaction with those who wanted to follow him but who struggled to understand what that meant. Each of the three interactions seemed to lack the singleness of focus that Jesus had with “his face set toward Jerusalem” (v.53).

*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” And 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.” To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (**Luke 9:57-62 NRSV**)*

Jesus’ followers experienced struggle with competing priorities, just like we do. **They tried to juggle their desire to follow Jesus with cultural responsibilities and expectations**.

The first follower wanted to do good, promising Jesus “to follow you wherever you go.” Jesus’ response indicates his need for a place to stay, but the follower’s promise to follow isn’t backed up with action to help locate a place to stay.

Two other potential followers seem willing enough, however, they appear to struggle with understanding how following Jesus fits in with their other cultural responsibilities, like mourning the dead (which in that culture lasted far longer than a day) or saying goodbye to the household (and probably putting everything in order before leaving).

What does Jesus say? “Drop those things. They aren’t as important as my kingdom work.” Does this not seem a little harsh? Isn’t Jesus more compassionate? Doesn’t he care about mourning the dead or taking care of the family? Of course he does. We see it multiple times in his life.

In this passage Luke choses to use Greek literary devices called “chreiae” (kray-ah) to convey a specific point through a saying or action by a character in a story. In these verses, the theme of discipleship is emphasized by phrases like “I will follow you,” or “Follow me.” Rather than taking Jesus’ words **literally**, we can understand that **he is showing how important intentionality is to stay true to one’s purpose.** In fact, Jesus is demonstrating that intentionality and focus as he travels toward Jerusalem.

Rather than saying that followers literally should not bury their dead, Jesus is showing his followers that **the path to discipleship is not easy**. Cultural responsibilities in Jesus’ time were important and hard to break away from. We, too, face cultural systems that expect us to do what everybody else does, following culturally constructed roles and scripts**. Jesus is illustrating that discipleship will not only require us to handle conflict differently, but it will also require us to change our priorities, particularly in how we move and operate within the world.**

We might ask ourselves this question: How are we loving our neighbors as ourselves when it comes to our day-to-day interactions with family, co-workers, and friends, both in person and online? How does our discipleship to Jesus affect our political views, especially when it comes to how the poor and other marginalized groups are cared for in our society? If we answer these questions **in the context of being a Jesus follower**, we will see Jesus’ approach to these groups reflected in our actions.

How should we apply today’s 2-part passage to our lives?

1. **Recognize our tendency to want to be right more than we want to be loving.**Though we can villainize the disciples James and John for wanting to call down fire on the unwelcoming Samaritan village, we must be on guard for those same tendencies in ourselves.
2. **Realize that following Jesus requires a singular focus and intention.**This means that our priorities will be different, and our loyalties to our culture and its systems may not fit within the focus and intentionality of a Jesus follower. If we value what Jesus values – people – our actions will reflect that same commitment to love, even when it is difficult.
3. **Know that authenticity in our discipleship is an ongoing process of growth.**Because we are steeped in stories from our families of origin and our culture, it takes time to recognize the inconsistencies between what we say and do and what we **want** to say and do as followers of Jesus. God accepts us as we are while encouraging us to love with Jesus’ singular focus. **We are called to accept others as they are while encouraging them to accept Jesus’ love and love others in return.**

The disciples’ struggles are our struggles. With the help of the Holy Spirit, let’s become more gracious and loving, especially with people who disagree with us. We don’t always have to be right.

Let’s keep our eyes on the goal of seeking God’s Kingdom and His righteousness first. Don’t worry so much fitting in with the culture or wanting to be thought of as good.

Let’s be true **Jesus followers**, yielding to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit so he can shine through us as we participate in Jesus’ ongoing ministry right here, right now.

Closing Prayer