

It's possible that we're all attending the wrong church . . . at least today when these perplexing words of Jesus that Doug read for us, "Let the dead bury their own dead," are what's being served up in the lectionary.

Perhaps we would be better off at the church my friend and colleague Jeremy visited while he was on vacation this past week. Upon entering, there is a large banner that declares: "We live to make Jesus make sense." If that church follows the lectionary and their minister is preaching on this passage this morning, I wish 'em well. Those are some mighty huge expectations to fulfill. The sagest scholars and most gifted preachers I know struggle to make sense of these passages about the demands of Christian discipleship . . . I'm not quite sure how one lone pastor at a church in Ohio is going to force the mystery and power of Jesus into something that can "make sense," bless his heart.

And so, in the spirit of managing your expectations, let me assure you that, when you leave here this morning, the words "Oh, well, that makes sense" will not be on your lips. After all, how, when we operate with our modern sensibilities, how can it make sense for Jesus, as in "Jesus our brother, kind and good" and "Jesus the good shepherd" how can it make sense for that same Jesus to say to someone who wants to be his follower, "Nope! You can't go back and bury your father if you also want to follow me." Geez, whatever happened to honoring your mother and your father? It's hard to make sense of it, isn't it?

A few weeks ago in the *Passages at Panera* Bible study, we were studying this same passage and someone wondered why Jesus is so rude in it. In that moment, (as I glanced around for lightning bolts because she had articulated what I myself was thinking) I desperately wanted to be able to offer her an answer, an answer that would soften Jesus' rebuke and make his behavior more socially acceptable. I really wanted to make it all make sense. But, one of the things I've learned after six years of graduate theological education, eighteen years of ordained ministry, and thrice-weekly Bible studies, I've learned that I cannot make it all make sense. And, I'm beginning to understand that I am not supposed to.

Indeed, if it all made sense, like wearing a helmet when riding a bike makes sense, we wouldn't need to have faith—which is, by its very nature, often non-sensical. Nonsense is defined by Merriam Webster as *language, conduct, or an idea that is absurd or contrary to good sense*. And that's what these passages that Doug read for us this morning seem like to us—absurd or contrary to good sense—absurd and contrary to what we think we know about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Indeed, absurd and contrary to what we want to believe about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

But, just because we can't make this passage all make sense, that doesn't mean there aren't truths to be gleaned, insights to be had, and applications from this scripture to our own lives. And, the best way to discover those things is likely to step back from the specifics of "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" and look at the larger context in which the verse appears.

These passages begin the third section of Luke's gospel. The first section is about Jesus' birth up to his baptism and testing in the wilderness. The second section of Luke focuses on Jesus calling the disciples, performing miracles, healing the sick, and teaching about what the Kingdom of God is like. During this time he builds up quite the following, so much so that the political and religious authorities begin to understand him as a threat to their power and corruption and they decide they want him gone.

And that's where we enter the story this morning . . . this third section of Luke, this section in which Jesus realizes that the time is almost up. The passage begins "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem." This is where the author applies the clutch and shifts to a higher gear. There's not much time left for Jesus to share the message of the Kingdom of Heaven before his death. A sense of urgency is developing. There is so, so much for Jesus and his followers to do and there is very little time in which to do it. The author of Luke communicates this urgency with these three exchanges Jesus has with would-be followers.

The first encounter is with someone who approaches Jesus and says, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus says to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Here Jesus explains that there's nothing comfortable, secure, or reliable about being his disciple. It's not a day job, you don't get to go home and relax at night. It's an all-the-time job that demands incredible sacrifices from those who chose to follow him.

The second encounter is with someone whom Jesus approaches. Jesus says to him, "Follow me." And the person responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." And it is then that Jesus says to him, some of the most perplexing and nonsensical words in the Gospel, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." Really, Jesus? Really. You approached him. You caught him off guard. He asks to do this one little thing but there's not time for the poor kid to go help his mom bury his dad?

And the third exchange with a would-be follower is similar "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at home." To which Jesus responds, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Some scholars suggest these three exchanges offer up a heavy dose of hyperbole on the part of Jesus—that Jesus is exaggerating in order to make a point. I sure hope that's true. But, literal or exaggerated, there's no denying that "The demands of following Jesus deter the would-be disciples. Jesus demands an immediate and radical discipleship; not even legitimate domestic responsibilities may interfere."¹

Jesus demands that he be top priority in the life of his disciples. There isn't time to mamby-pamby around. There is ministry to be done before his death and he doesn't need a rag-tag group of followers whining about the things they didn't get to do, or distracted by other responsibilities. This is the home stretch and there's no time to attend to matters at home. At this point, the single qualifying characteristic of any would-be disciple is someone who is, in a word, free . . . someone who has the freedom to dedicate themselves with all their heart and all their soul and all their mind to following Jesus . . . someone who can just embrace the non-sense of leaving behind the securities of every day life in order to pursue the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps it is in this idea of being free to follow Jesus that this passage most poignantly intersects with our own lives. I don't think it means we stop going to funerals because Jesus said to let the dead bury their own dead. I think it means that, in order to follow Jesus, we need to be free, we need to stop looking backwards and instead keep our focus on the kingdom that is to come on earth as it is in heaven. Earlier in this chapter, Jesus instructs his disciples on how they are to travel . . . "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even a jacket." Again, free yourselves from anything that would weigh you down, slow you down, or distract you.

¹ Carey, Greg. Luke: All Flesh Shall See God's Salvation. Pg. 26.

And so it is that as those who seek to follow Christ today, we, too, are invited to embrace the non-sense of the message of Jesus. And while it's hard for me to imagine setting off for a journey without clean underwear and some snacks, I think there are other things that I, and perhaps you, would be well-served to leave behind if we are going to be free to truly embrace the opportunity, not to make Jesus make sense, but rather to have faith, to place our full trust in, to follow Jesus.

For instance . . .

The “what ifs” of a career opportunity not taken, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Shame over some indiscretion from your past, it doesn't make sense to take that along as you follow Jesus.

Regrets about what you said or left unsaid, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Grudges against other people, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Rage and angst about things that are beyond your control, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Insecurities about your looks, your smarts, your abilities, your worth, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Worries about your finances, your health, other people, it doesn't make sense to take those along as you follow Jesus.

Friends, the greatest freedom we can ever know is the freedom of new life in Christ. Christ is willing to free us from all that binds us, holds us back, enslaves us, and oppresses us. Christ wants us to be free. Christ wants us—heart, mind, and soul. It may not make sense, that Immanuel—God with us—would want us this rag tag group of would-be followers instead of those folks in Ohio who are able to make Jesus make sense. But that, my friends, is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—through the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, we are free and worthy and wanted followers of Christ, no matter what, whether it makes sense or not. Thanks be to God.