

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 9:51-62

Sermon: "First Things First"

They were 5,000 feet in the air in a two-seat Cessna when suddenly the pilot slumped over and died. It was near Mount Hope, Indiana, they were flying to Indianapolis for lunch, the 81-year-old passenger and his 52-year-old friend and pilot. The elder passenger knew nothing about flying and a lot less about landing!

In the next twenty minutes you can bet he gave his total attention to the voices on the radio and the instructions given to him. Another pilot nearby coached him and gave him a "crash course" (pardon the pun) in flying a two-seat Cessna and most importantly in landing. He circled the airport three times and came in, bounced a few times, and landed in a soggy field. Incredibly there was no damage except a bent propeller.

If this happened to you or to me today, our number one priority would be determined very quickly! It would not be the time to call out for a pizza, nor to casually call a friend on one's cell to plan an outing to attend a ball game. The main thing and the only thing would be to land that Cessna and not crash!

In the class I took earlier this year one of the first sayings that we learned as leaders was; **“Effective leaders know that they must do first things first and second things, not at all.”**

Stephen Covey in his book, *First Things First*, says the issue for life is just that first things first! So the compelling question coming out of our gospel reading from Luke 9 is this: How does one keep the "main thing" the main thing in one's life? And just what is the "main thing"?

One day, right after Jesus had been snubbed and spurned by the people in a Samaritan village, someone came up to him and promised, "***I will follow you wherever you go.***" A bit later, Jesus says to another person, "***Follow me.***" But the person excuses himself, "***Lord, let me first go and bury my father.***" Jesus turns to another, "***Follow me.***" But he answers, "***Excuse me, Jesus, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.***" Jesus' response is uncompromisingly direct — appearing insensitive, "***Let the dead bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God ... no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God***" (vv. 60, 62). Jesus knew that a farmer who looks back when plowing his field instead of forward at the chosen guidepost, will plow a very crooked furrow.

Jesus heard many excuses in his short three-year ministry. Some excuses were lame. Many were laudable. Many excuses were admirable. It's hard to think of a better excuse than to take care of one's family. In our modern life, family is in disarray with nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce, custody battles, deadbeat fathers, abuse, incest, and neglect running rampant. What could be a better, a more admirable task than to care for one's family?

How many times have we heard or said ourselves, "My family is first"? The most righteous, respectable, and acceptable statement politicians, CEOs, and others make when changing careers is, "I'm quitting so I can take more time for my family." Family — that's an admirable, lofty, sterling excuse. But it's not family first — it's the kingdom first! How do we keep the main thing the main thing?

The Bible is full of excusers who were called to do God's bidding. Gideon excused himself and complained that his family was poor and that he was the least in his family. Moses excused himself because he was not eloquent in speech and thus tried to disqualify himself from leading the Hebrews out of bondage from the land of the Egyptians.

Jeremiah said he was too young. I was too shy and I have a speech impediment. The amazing thing is that God is able to use us excusers once we get beyond our excuses. When we live in our baptismal covenant and are bathed in God's grace in Christ we can say this to one another, "Let me hear your excuses and I'll tell you mine, and we'll travel together a bit with them and eventually we'll get to the real issue."

What is the real issue? Consider the little boy playing hide and seek. He ran quickly and found a remote cabinet in the house. *This ought to be the best place of all*, he thought, as he climbed in and closed the door. He remained absolutely quiet. But his sister saw his shoelace sticking out under the closed cabinet door, followed it, and found her brother. Excuses like shoelaces are to be followed and eventually they will take you to the real source and issue.

John was a member of the local church but never volunteered for anything or even worshipped. He always had excuses. So in an effort to find out why he never worshipped I followed his "shoelace" and found out one day that he had been hurt by someone in the church and that festering wound was the source of his excuses.

Often the "shoelace" trail leads to fear or grief or guilt or a hurt. If someone followed your "shoelace" or mine where would it lead? Our excuses hiding behind our heart's cabinet doors are cover-ups and need to be exposed.

As we explore the Gospels we constantly find Jesus asking someone to follow him. When we are children we are raised "to believe" but not necessarily "to follow." Jesus told the disciple to follow him. And today we hear how we need to believe in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and of course we do but how often do we hear about how we are to follow him? In our creeds we state how we believe in God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit but does that belief translate into daily following.

For me it is easy, painless, and comfortable to confess I believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as we do constantly in the three creeds, in our relational sharing of our faith, and I do in my preaching and teaching. But hold it. We live in nice homes, have plenty of clothes and all the amenities of life one might want or think one needs. But are we following Jesus in a world of hunger and deprivation? Are we following Jesus if we aren't washing our neighbors' feet in love, compassion, and generosity?

I was taught in my confirmation instruction Ephesians 2:8-9:

"For by grace you are saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." But what about Ephesians 2:10? ***"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."***

We are never saved by works; we are saved for works. It seems that those works are that we follow Jesus, our crucified and forgiving Savior.

If the question, "Are you following Jesus or believing in Christ?" seems unfair or artificial because the two are inseparable. Theoretically, yes, they are inseparable but pragmatically, no. We separate them all the time. I suggest if we must separate them let us err on the side of following. The saying goes: "One can believe without following, but one cannot follow without believing."

"Come follow me," Jesus says over and over in the gospels.

"Let the dead bury the dead; but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God...."

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah not only anoints Elisha as his successor but also allows Elisha's request to **"Let me kiss my father and my mother and then I will follow you."** Jesus is less tolerant and insists on first things first. He keeps the main thing the main thing. One practical way to put first things first is to begin to live by the compass and not the clock.

The clock represents our appointments, our commitments, schedules, goals, and activities — what we do and how we manage our time. Often we are overscheduled and time that originally was a gift has become a tyranny. The compass on the other hand represents our direction, vision, values, principles, conscience, purpose, and mission — what we feel is truly important as God leads our lives. What is the main thing? But to earnestly seek to follow Jesus and proclaim the kingdom to all in word and deed.

Jesus says, "***No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.***" It's about first things first. Amen