

“Jesus Knew What Time it Is. Do You?”

June 26, 2016

I

“Let the dead bury the dead!” Kind of sticks in your brain, doesn’t it? And for some strange reason I thought of Kenny Roger’s lyrics to the song, “The Gambler.” Remember? “Know when to hold ’em. Know when to fold ’em. Know when to walk away ... and know when to run ...” I wonder why that came to mind. Let’s look and see.

Now if you study this 9th chapter of Luke ... and later on ... the 14th chapter ... ’cause Jesus is pretty consistent across the whole book ... if you study ’em you’ll see Jesus being trailed by lots of folks who want to follow Him. I guess they’re attracted to His charisma ... to His message ... to His teaching. ... Just His sheer attractiveness as teacher, preacher, healer – getting as close as they can to this source of radiant power ... radiating from Him like “heat from a coal.”

And so maybe they want to be a part of the action, a part of this Kingdom He’s preachin’ about. ... So they’ve simply shown up and asked to sign on and come along. But then Jesus says, “Whoa” ... slows ’em down and says, “If you can’t turn your back on what you’ve got ... if you can’t put my way first before any other way in your life ... then you’re just kiddin’ yourself and you’re not really fit for the Kingdom of God.”

But here’s a question: Why the hard words now to these erstwhile followers? And so I guess ... to you and me? Why?

Well, I think one possibility is that maybe He was engaging in hyperbole to make His point ... that it’s all a matter of priorities. Bury my father? No. Say farewell to those at home? No. ’Cause loyalty to God is not just one allegiance to be juggled among all the rest. In fact it seems Jesus’ way here even claims priority over the best ... not the worst of human relationships. I mean, it’s primary.

So if you’re gonna commit yourself to following Jesus ... you can’t have second thoughts. It’s just not negotiable. No, it’s a matter of life and death. ’Cause ... getting back to Kenny Rogers ... Jesus knew what time it was. And He knew He was on his way to die.

See, Jesus probably had some idea about the hard road ahead of Him. And of course Luke – writing about 50 years later – knows all about that hard way – persecution, death for following Jesus’ way. I mean, to have a Christian in the family was dangerous for everyone! ’Cause the Romans ... if nothing else ... were pretty thorough. And I guess if they found one believer in a household they’d arrest

everyone else in sight. So it really was true that turning toward Jesus meant turning away from your family, whether you wanted to or not. 'Cause for them, once you make Jesus your first priority, everything else falls by the wayside. ... Not 'cause God takes it away from you, but 'cause that's just how the world works.

Because the fact is ... that as long as the world resists those who set out to transform it, those transformers are going to pay a heavy price. Ask ... oh ... Desmond Tutu ... or if you could have ... remember Nelson Mandela ... in prison for decades. Or in our own country – remember Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman – those three civil rights workers, murdered in Philadelphia, Mississippi, by the Klan and the local police? Remember Stonewall – as well as others murdered by those in authority in our very own day? So as someone put it, “no one tangles with the powers that be ... and gets away unscorched.”

So again, what's Jesus up to here? Well, I don't think He's threatening you or me. No, I think instead He's refusing to lie to you. I think He's refusing to make His way sound easier. ... slicker than it is. No, I think He wants you and me to know very clearly what it costs so that no one will follow Him under false pretenses. And you know what? I suspect that if that sounds a tad melodramatic, maybe you and I've lost track of what following Him is all about.

See, according to Luke's story here, Jesus died 'cause He told the truth to everyone He met. In fact, He was the Truth – a perfect mirror where folks saw themselves in God's own light. So I suppose in the face of His Truth ... in the face of His fierce love for God, in the face of His steadfast walking the way of the cross toward its sure end. ... In the face of His call to you and me to follow in His way ... maybe ... your and my cowardice ... your and my selfishness ... or whatever ... is brought to light.

Now, allow me here a little aside – to make my point. Someone once asked me to think of someone who represented Christ in my life. And after thinking long and hard – asking myself who was it who told me the truth about myself so clearly ... that I wanted to strangle him for it?

And I remembered an older, fellow priest who sat across my kitchen table from me a few years ago and told me a hard truth about myself. And that made a big, positive difference in my life ... although his words were very hard to hear as he said them to me. And just so, I think Jesus confronts you and me with the truth of our lives.

See, take Jesus out of the room and all these things – like “how'm I doin'?” become relative. “Hey I'm not that much worse than you are! No ... and you're not much worse than I am.” So hey! We're both OK!

But leave Jesus in the room, and there's just no room to hide. Leave Jesus in the room ... leave Him there beckoning you and me to come along and follow Him where He calls you ... you either follow Him out the back door, letting the screen bang behind you ... or you kid yourself into thinking you know what time it is ... thinking you've signed on to an easy way ... with all the time in the world.

II

So here's a question: What's following Jesus all about? Is it about being good ... about being a conscientious citizen ... staying within the lines as they say, sticking to the safe way? Or is following Jesus about changing the world ... or at least your little corner of it ... living in such a different way ... walking such a counter-cultural way ... that some ... either figuratively or literally ... would like to kill you for it! So let's take a minute here and imagine.

'Cause if you do walk out that back door, letting the screen bang behind you – oh the places you could go! Think about all those stories across scripture where ordinary folks – sinners like you and me – heard God's call and were surprised, were shocked, heard themselves being called to be what they'd never imagined before – called to do things they never dreamed they could do.

Moses ... he stuttered ... never dreamed he could lead the Israelites out of slavery. Isaiah had unclean lips ... never dreamed he could prophesy; Magdalene? A woman of the night who felt possessed by demons ... became a forgiven and trusted companion of those who chose the way of God's purpose ... once she'd turned around and said "yes" to Jesus' call.

I mean, over and over again you can hear the cries of shock, of fear, of amazement ... and at first you do hear the excuses too, don't you? All those excuses surfaced first because they were ... you know ... human. I'm too young, I'm too old, I'm too busy, I'm a sinner. I can't speak in public. I have to go bury my father; I have to go say goodbye to folks at home. I mean, the excuses were ... and are ... as numerous as the calls. And don't you imagine that your excuse sounds just the same to God's ears. And God sighs, "Oh please ... tell me one I haven't heard!"

See, I think the deep secret of Jesus' hard words to you and me in this passage is that our fear of suffering robs us of life, turning our lives into a "stingy, cautious way of living" that's not really living at all. See, you can try to save yourself from any suffering. I mean, as someone's pointed out, you can "try to stockpile it, being very, very careful about what you say yes to; being very, very cautious about who you let into your life, frisking everyone at the door and letting only the most harmless folks inside; and being very, very wary about going outside yourself, venturing forth only under very heavy guard and ready to retreat at the first sign of trouble."

But the deep secret of Jesus' hard words is that the way to have abundant life is not to save it but to spend it, to give it away. So what if? What if – like Jesus – you do know what time it is? What if you answer "yes" to God's call to follow – letting that screen door bang behind you? How can you be more than you ever dreamed of? Let's think about it.

III

See, when Jesus says “follow me,” He’s inviting you to share the same road with Him, to set your face toward the future. And I do think with Jesus it’s not where you’ve been that matters, but where you’re going; it’s not whether you’ve fallen, but whether you’ll get up; it’s not who you’ve hurt in the past, but who you’ll help in the future. To follow – not in slavish imitation, but to follow Him within your own time and in your own place. ‘Cause there is no time, there is no place, there is no circumstance where you can’t follow Him.

And once you face the crisis of His call to purpose in your own life, I guarantee – I guarantee that you will never be the same again.

So. Finally this. My takeaway point: The words that we heard Jesus speak from the Gospel this morning will never be easy words to hear. But they are not, in the last analysis, an invitation to follow Jesus into death but an invitation to follow him into life. But you can only follow Him if you do not get tripped up on the fear of suffering, if you do not get so frightened by that, that you forget who you are, that you forget whose you are, that you forget why you’re alive in the first place.

See, there is a certain amount of pain involved in being human, and a good bit more pain involved in being fully human and alive, especially in a world that counts on your fear of suffering and uses it to keep you in line. But to be where God is – to follow Jesus – means going beyond the limits of your own comfort and safety. It means receiving your life as a gift instead of guarding it as your own possession. It means sharing the life you’ve been given instead of bottling it for your own consumption – sharing it, by tipping it out into the wide sea of God’s Kingdom.

“Know when to walk away. And know when to run.” Jesus knew what time it was. Do you?

Amen.

1. Resources used: Barbara Brown Taylor, “Risking Life” in *The Seeds of Heaven*; Ernest Campbell’s “Follow Me,” found in Thomas Long and Cornelius Plantinga (Eds.), *A Chorus of Witnesses*; Barbara Brown Taylor, “High-Priced Discipleship” in *Bread of Angels*; Fred Craddock’s *Luke* (Interpretation series); Synthesis for June 26, 2016.