

**I Have Decided to Follow Jesus Sermon Series**  
**“No Turning Back”**  
**Luke 9:57-62, Philippians 3:12-14**  
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**July 31, 2022**

This whole month we have been talking about following Jesus, and the drama that we just saw illustrates and summarizes so perfectly much of what we’ve been talking about. Deciding to follow Jesus is a response to an invitation. Like the gentle Master of Dancers, Jesus calls to us and offers a life of freedom and joy, and like the Marionetta, we place our trust in him and allow him to cut away those things that keep us captive and hold us back from true life. Others around us, like the other marionettes in the drama, might think we are foolish for trusting the Master. Not everyone wants to let the Master cut the strings, and others may not go with us as we embrace a new life, but we remain committed to listening to and following the voice of the Master despite what others do or don’t do. Even when there may be some cost involved, or cross to bear, we follow. At the conclusion of the drama, the Marionetta was enjoying her freedom and new life. She was glad she had chosen a life without strings. Her gladness over her new life is a reminder to us that there is an ongoing gladness that comes with our own decision to follow, and “ongoing” is the key word for today. Each week during this sermon series we have taken a line from the hymn “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” as a our theme, and today we are finishing up the series with the line “no turning back” that is repeated at the end of each verse.

There are some commitments that we make that we know are not necessarily forever commitments. Recently there has been in interest in our household in experimenting with hair colors so my mind instantly goes to hair dye when I think about short-term or temporary commitments. If you want a color to last through a few washes but don’t necessarily want it to last forever, you use *semi-permanent* hair dye. Our lives are full of opportunities to make semi-permanent commitments. We commit to jobs that we intend to stick with, but it may not be the job that you do until you’re 70. Buying a house is another kind of semi-permanent commitment. You buy because you’re planning to stay for longer than the length of 12-month lease, and you could end up living there for the rest of your life, but a new job or big life change could result in moving on from an address that you have listed somewhere as your permanent address. Probably most of the commitments that we make in life are really kind of semi-permanent because life is changing and unpredictable and we have to adapt and pivot (that’s the word that we learned during Covid, right?), but there are some commitments that we make with the intention of keeping them forever – come what may. Marriage is that kind of commitment. Yes, you know going in that there will be challenges and things you didn’t expect, but you vow to stick together through and despite whatever may come, “‘til death do us part.” This is the kind of commitment that we’re talking about when we talk about deciding to follow Jesus. Jesus’s call to us is a call to an ongoing life of discipleship – as one commentator has said “the path to following Jesus is not a part-time job; it’s a perpetual assignment...God does not issue [God’s] call for a season, but for a lifetime.” When you think about the gladness that comes from walking with Jesus, and if you imagine the joyfully free Marionette enjoying the sunshine and waterfalls as a metaphor for your life walking with Christ, there’s no problem with words like “ongoing,” “permanent,” and “perpetual.” Who doesn’t like the idea of perpetual joy and gladness? What you know, though, is that sticking with anything forever, through ups and downs, and through changing circumstances and changing feelings is not easy, and that is certainly true about our commitment to Jesus – even though it does also come with blessings and benefits.

One of the things that I always appreciate about Jesus is that he never minimized the truth about this. There’s no bait and switch with Jesus when it comes to what he says about following him. Yes, there are the promises about finding abundant life, and rest, and joy, and peace, and acceptance, and communion with God through Christ, but, as we saw last week, Jesus was always clear and up front about

the cost and the sacrifices that come with following him. It's not always going to be easy, but still he urges us – keep going. Stick with it. Stick with me. This is what the Gospel passage that we read from Luke is about.

Three different times in the passage, Jesus tells potential followers, “if you're coming after me, you need to know, there's no turning back.” What's so wonderful about this passage is that it goes right to the heart of what we tend to do when we're afraid or when we need to do hard things. We want to make excuses, right? Or we rationalize. Most of us are talented at coming up with ways to justify why we can't, or won't, or maybe shouldn't even do something that needs doing when it's too hard, or uncomfortable, or scary. In this passage, Jesus gets ahead of our excuses. You will be tempted by these things, you will want to use them as excuses, but don't let them derail you. Last week one of our youth, Travis, talked about our walk with Jesus being like a highway, and he said there will always be exit ramps-opportunities to get off the road Jesus is leading us on. I'm going to use his image here, because that's kind of what we see here as Jesus talks to these would be followers. These are 3 exit ramps that you'll come across, but don't take them!

The first one is the exit ramp to security. The Son of Man has no place to lay his head, he tells the first person, meaning, this is a total trust walk. Most of us the time we like to be able to control and predict things. We want a clear plan and to be able to easily move from point a to be to c, but when we follow Jesus, it isn't always like that. In fact, there are times when God leads us forward and asks us to move when we have no idea where that step is going to take us. Abraham is the classic example, isn't he? Leave your home, leave your family, and go to the place where I lead you. That's not the detailed itinerary most of us would prefer. When we're following Jesus there are no guarantees that his plans for our lives are going to match the plans we have imagined for ourselves. There are lots of moments along the way when faith will be required, moments when we need to trust in the Lord with all our hearts and lean not on our own understanding. That can feel scary and like the perfect time to *stop* following Jesus, but if that's where you are, Jesus is saying, keep trusting. Keep following. Don't turn back.

With the second person, Jesus anticipates the second exit ramp. The second man wanted to go and bury his father before following Jesus. There is nothing wrong with burying our loved ones, but the scenario is representative of the tasks, and concerns, and sometimes worries of daily life that can become all-consuming. Life is so very demanding. There is work to do to put food on the table, and children to raise, and aging parents to care for, and there are dishes to be washed, and laundry to do, and yards to be mowed, and friendships to maintain, and we really should try to get some exercise in there somewhere. All of these things are important, but there are times when we tend to lose ourselves or lose perspective in the midst of all of the demands and important things that we have to do. Things that are important, like work, can become not just the thing that puts food on the table but also the thing that keeps us from spending time with God or with our families if we don't maintain healthy habits and boundaries. It can feel as if we can either do all of the things that we need to do *or* follow Jesus but not both or not both at the same time. It is easy to compartmentalize our lives and to put all of our to do's in one compartment, and our relationship with God in a separate compartment, but Jesus's call isn't a call to follow him when we're done with everything else. Rather, he calls us to follow and walk with him all the time – *in* our working, *in* our chores, *in* our time with friends and family. If you are feeling overwhelmed by the demands of life and if it feels like there just isn't time to be devoted to doing what you have to do and to following Jesus, it may feel like the time has come to take a break, but Jesus is saying, seek me and seek my kingdom *in* what you're doing, but don't turn aside or turn back now. Keep following.

The third potential exit ramp is the one where you get off the road, cross the overpass, and get back on the highway going in the direction that you just came from. To the final would be follower, who wants to go back and say goodbye to his family that he's left behind first, Jesus makes a reference to plowing. No one who puts their hand to the plow and then looks back is fit for the Kingdom, he says. Sometimes we do feel prone to look backward and that can be a problem for us when we want to follow

Jesus. The things that we left behind can seem alluring – maybe in some ways life was easier before making a commitment to Jesus. It was easier to think of yourself first, or to keep all your things to yourself. Maybe some of your bad habits were a source of comfort, and there may be times when we look backward with some amount of longing. On the other hand, there may be times when we look back and we remember the shame of past failures and it's easy to start looking back at them and to start feeling bad about them. Before we know it we are stuck and feel like we can't go forward. Or when we feel the discomfort that may come when Jesus leads us forward, we may be tempted to look back or to go back to our old ways of thinking and understanding because those ways are familiar and that feels better. Changing, and learning, and growing can be hard, and looking backward is a way to avoid having to do any of that. If there are things behind you that you find yourself wanting to go back to, if you are feeling tempted to look or to go backward, Jesus is saying stop looking at what is behind, and look instead at me. Keep your eyes on me so that you can see where I'm leading you to follow.

It can be hard to stay on the road when there are so many exit ramps along the way that are tempting and that look like they'll take us to just the place we might want to go, but there is a sense of urgency in what Jesus says in our passage. Jesus's is coming again and he is bringing his kingdom with him in all of its fullness. He is leading us now toward that day and as we follow we are becoming prepared ourselves for it, and we get to participate in the work of helping to prepare others for it, too. It is not always easy to keep going, but the Apostle Paul reminds us in Philippians that while it is sometimes hard to keep running the race, we need to keep running, because the prize that we are reaching for makes it all worth it. We are racing toward the fulfillment of God's good plans for the whole Creation and for all who belong to God through Christ Jesus. That is where Jesus is leading us, so follow him- through the ups and downs, through the faith-testing times, through the exciting times and the tiring times – keep following him through all the times, no turning back. Amen.