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A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Paul Escamilla
Presented June 27, 2010

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction

Luke 9:51-62

In 1978, researchers in Tanzania discovered impressions in clay that were 3.7 million years old, and preserved in hardened ash that had then eroded over succeeding millennia. In time, anthropologist Mary Leakey, a Kenyan fossil hunter with an eye to both prints and their patterns, uncovered in that menagerie of markings a trail of footprints left by three humans—male, female, and child—that led across the volcanic Laetoli Plain on a dry savanna in northern Tanzania. The child’s footprints sometimes dawdled behind those of the adults and sometimes overlapped. Perhaps the child was stepping into parents’ footprints, a game children still enjoy.

At one point, the tracks indicate that the female paused and turned to her left. Leakey interpreted that turning somewhat philosophically, as signifying hesitation. In an article for *National Geographic* she wrote, “A remote ancestor—just as you or I might—experienced a moment of doubt.”

Perhaps it was doubt. Perhaps it was some deliberation of a brighter sort. Or delight—noticing something over her shoulder—a sunset, a bird in flight—that she wished to observe more carefully. In any event, this traveling by these three sojourners, and this moment of turning, are among our earliest glimpses of human behavior. A purpose, and a pausing. That’s who we are, isn’t it? That’s what we do: act, then cease from acting, and then act again.

What then could Jesus have meant by the statement—so seemingly drastic and extreme—that “whoever puts hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the kingdom of God”?

Søren Kierkegaard once observed that life can only be lived forward, and can only be understood backward. There’s that rhythm—purpose, and pausing. He was, in a sense, echoing the insight of another philosopher, Socrates by name, who in the 5th century B.C. testified at trial that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” In seminary, we learned to call this process of “living” paired with “examination” *action and reflection*, and were led to understand that the church is at its best when it establishes a rhythm that includes both.

Whoever puts hand to plow and looks back is not fit . . .

Marvin Feldpausch, an old farmer in a church I served years ago, saw his young preacher zipping this way and that, from pastoral care visits to committee meetings to Habitat for Humanity work to the library for study. One day he pulled me aside and said, “Preacher, don’t forget to look over your shoulder every now and then to see what’s gaining on you.”

I think it was pretty good advice, and I've sought to follow it. But, again, it leaves me wondering what Jesus had in mind when he said, essentially, "No looking back."

It was the German biblical scholar Rudolph Bultmann who once made the claim that all of us carry within us a faint recollection of the garden of Eden. That vision, that ideal, calls to us from the past, pulls us toward it, asks of us at least a pause, a turning, a moment for acknowledgment of that ancient joy and ache within our hearts that is God's original gift of blessing and home.

Then there's the other sort of turning, that pausing that has to do with wondering about right steps and missteps and our path through life in general. "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . ." wrote Frost about a traveler forced to choose between two roads. The poem ends with "I shall be telling this with a sigh . . ." Why the sigh? Because the traveler cannot help but pause and wonder about "The Road Not Taken."

Whoever puts hand to plow and looks back is not fit . . .

Not even to swat a fly? Set the row straight with the eye? Catch a glimpse at the clouds rolling in? Notice the color purple somewhere in the thicket of the adjacent field?

What about doubt? Indecision? Uncertainty about the course we're following? What about those moments when we wonder if what we're doing is what we're meant to be doing? The Spanish musician Pablo Casals, perhaps the greatest cellist of the 20th century, was traveling in the States when, on a hiking expedition, a boulder rolled over his left hand—his fingering hand—clearly damaging it. He explains that, in that very instant, from somewhere inside of him came this reaction: "Thank God I'll never have to play the cello again!" Of course, the thought that followed immediately after was, predictably, one of concern regarding the state of his hand and the risk of damage. He did in fact suffer damage in that hand, but recovered within months to full dexterity, and was soon offering world class performances once again.

What a curious thought to have at such a moment! God's gift to the world of some of the most sublime cello music ever played, and he's relieved, for a split second, that he might be freed of this talent/burden. And yet, I wouldn't be surprised if you haven't experienced such a thought yourself. If not with work, then in marriage, or with children, or your parents; with a friend, or in some volunteer capacity; even with the church. Aren't there moments when we might imagine the lightness, the simplicity, the freedom of not having that privileged relationship? Aren't there seasons when we reflect on where we've been, what we're doing, and have second thoughts about having said yes to it however long ago? "Thank God I'll never have to _____ again!"

Whoever puts hand to plow and looks back is not fit . . .

What is Jesus suggesting? That we plow through life like a bull through a China shop? That we put blinders on our eyes, our minds, our hearts, our hands?

I've heard for a lifetime the phrase, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it for me." The only problem with that outlook is that it suggests God no longer says anything. What about the ongoing guidance and presence in our lives of the Holy Spirit? Don't we believe that God is still speaking to us—*present tense*? Don't we pray, ". . . as the Scriptures are read, and your Word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you have to say to us *today*"? Today's guidance from God through the Holy Spirit may give us *pause* for its revelations beyond what we heard *yesterday*, leading us to reflect, reconsider, discern, and possibly even redirect our steps toward what we believe to be closer obedience to God.

Purpose and pausing went hand in hand on the Laetoli Plain 3.7 million years ago, and they do yet in our lives today; in our lives, and in the life of faith. Hand in hand, and step by step.

So what did the good rabbi of Nazareth mean by his words about never looking back? The Greek text gives a slightly different reading that might help us understand what Jesus meant. The injunction might more accurately be read as follows: *Whoever puts hand to the plow and turns back is not fit for the kingdom of God.*

Turning back is a very different thing altogether from *looking* back. To turn back is to quit God's new society, God's commonwealth as it is emerging in our midst. To turn back is to say no to the row before us, which is to say no to the harvest that will follow, and no to the life it will bring to us and to so many others.

What Jesus seems to disallow with this declaration is not so much pausing, or even looking back, but rather *turning our back* on life; refusing the sacred journey that leads forward from here. Jesus seems to be asking here not for perfection, but *persistence*, for continuing beyond our pausing to walk the path before us.

Frederick Nietzsche once made an observation I have carried with me for a long, long time: "The essential thing 'in heaven and earth' is . . . that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; that thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, something which has made life worth living." A long obedience in the same direction. Were I to say, "in the same *general* direction," I think I would still capture the essence of Nietzsche's sentiment.

I like the metaphor of a river for the journey of faith for many reasons, but primarily for this one: the river as a metaphor for the faith journey allows us to understand that life can have definite purpose as well as, at the same time, a dimension of meandering. Rivers zig and zag, twist and turn, but they *get there*; they do reach their goal. So it is with the spiritual life. We might zig and zag, pause and turn, doubt and struggle, wonder and wish and while away too much time speculating about “what if.” But, if the Portuguese are right, God writes straight with crooked lines—including the crooked lines our meandering paths tend to make. In time, “a long obedience in the same direction” is a river that carves a deep canyon, winding turns and all.

The final decision, however, to follow Jesus must finally have to do with more than simply making ourselves walk the long road of discipleship simply because we should. Our ethical tradition certainly establishes that we should do the right thing if for no other reason than because it is the right thing. However, over time, the “oughtness” must be textured by some inner music, some sense of not only the *rightness* but the *goodness* of a course of living.

I have long been moved by that poignant exchange Jesus had with his disciples in John 6, just after many of Jesus’ followers have turned away from following him. “Will you also leave me?” he says to his remaining disciples. To which they respond, “Lord, to whom can we go?” As if to say, “Well, actually, we’ve considered that option, but we can’t find any reasonable alternatives.” “Lord, to whom can we go,” they answer. “You have the words of eternal life.”

They’ve named for us all the final and best reason to persist in our discipleship: the awareness that following Jesus is finally not only right, but also good; not only required, but also rewarding. Infinitely so. With that discovery, that understanding, that work of grace in our minds and hearts to allow us to see obedience to God not only as faithful, but also as making life worth living, we are able to join the time-kept chorus sung by so many for so, so long: “I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back.”