

Good Bad Examples

In the name of him who calls to each of us, “Follow me”, dear friends in Christ: My father used to say that everyone is good for something; it just happens that some people are very good at being bad examples for the rest of us. This is what we see in today’s Gospel: four very good bad examples of discipleship. And since part of becoming a good disciple (which I presume we all want to be) is knowing what sort of behaviors and attitudes to avoid, we will do well to examine these bad examples in some detail. So let me set this up:

Jesus, his twelve disciples, and a number of his other followers are traveling from Galilee in the north of Palestine south toward Jerusalem in Judea. Jesus’ purpose for making this journey is clearly stated in the text: Jesus knows that the time of his earthly ministry is drawing to a close and he has “set his face toward Jerusalem”. The idyllic days of his teaching and healing around the Sea of Galilee are over. From here on out he will focus his ministry in and around the city in which he will fulfill his messianic mission to offer his life as the sacrifice for the sins of the world. It means that he will be facing increased opposition and, at times, the open hostility of his enemies. Ultimately it means his betrayal and abandonment by those who are closest to him, and his agonizing death on the cross. Jesus knows all this, and he is determined to see it through.

For this trip Jesus has made the rather unusual choice of leading his band of followers through the land of Samaria, which lies in between Galilee and Judea. Even though it was the shortest and most direct route, most Jews in the first century made a point of traveling the long way around Samaria because they considered its inhabitants unclean and they didn’t want to have anything to do with them. Not surprisingly, the Samaritans resented the Jews for their arrogance and tended to be less than hospitable on those rare occasions when Jews did travel through their land. This explains why, when Jesus sends a couple disciples ahead to a certain Samaritan village to inquire about food and lodging arrangements for the evening, they get a curt rejection. You see, in the first century you couldn’t just check in at the local Super 8. They didn’t have them. Instead, travelers would be put up in the homes of villagers – if they’d welcome you. And here’s Jesus with a group of maybe seventy to a hundred people. It’s likely the disciples who were sent ahead stuck their heads in the gate, spoke to a couple of the village elders, who may in turn have briefly discussed their request before deciding against it. “No thanks. We don’t need several dozen uppity Jews in our town trying to make us feel like inferiors. Go someplace else.”

It’s when word of the emissaries failed mission to secure a welcome returns that we get our first bad example of Christian discipleship. We understand that this is a disappointment. The whole group is hungry, tired, and looking for a place to call it a day. But the brothers James and John, the so called “sons of thunder”, take the rejection by the village personally. You can imagine them fuming about “those miserable, selfish, Samaritan dogs. How dare they refuse the Lord’s Christ? Just who do they think they are?” In view of this egregious affront to their Lord, they ask Jesus if he’d feel better if the two of them settled the score by calling down a divine napalm strike on the town.

It’s hard to know where to begin to describe all that’s wrong here. We’re told that Jesus “rebuked” them. My guess is that they got a full-blown lecture. We can well imagine what Jesus might have said: “Doesn’t that strike you as a bit harsh? Instant, horrible, fiery death for hundreds of people including women and children because a few of them refused us a little hospitality? You claim that you’re thinking of me, but how much of your anger is really about

your own wounded pride, your hatred of Samaritans, and your present discomfort? In all the time we've traveled together, and in all the hardships we've faced, have I ever given you the impression that I can't take care of myself? Isn't it usually *me* who's taking care of *you*? And have you ever seen me use my power to lash out against people like you're talking about? What in the world makes you think it's your duty to execute the judgment of God? And what makes you think that you have the power to do it even if you wanted to?"

It's easy for us to see that their "righteous indignation" is entirely inappropriate. It's completely opposite to the message of God's compassion and forgiveness that Jesus is here to proclaim—indeed, that he has just spent the better part of three years teaching *them* to proclaim. It appears they haven't learned their lessons very well. And unfortunately, this same spirit of misconceived and misdirected zeal has plagued the Church of Christ ever since. It's the evil that fuels the notion that the kingdom of God must be brought in by force and the sword, and that those who stand in the way must be destroyed. It's stained the cause of Christianity with such abuses as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Conquistadors, and numerous wars over matters of faith.

In our time Christians are less likely to become *violent* in their zeal to further the cause of Christ; but the same evil spirit continues to plague us. Just for example, in a few weeks our synod will meet in convention in Florida. And make no mistake: we are a church divided on a number of important issues. There are warring factions within our church body, and they all send out newsletters and E-mails to influence people to think and vote their way. No one is *physically* violent, yet it's wrong to see professing Christians assassinating characters, smearing names, making false and misleading statements, and trying to use political force and subterfuge to control others in the foolish notion that somehow that will advance the kingdom of Christ. Matters of faith, doctrine, and practice are vitally important. They are worth dying for if necessary. But hatred, revenge, anger, and force have no place in the Church or in its mission of reaching the lost. Instead, it ought to grieve us to see people go astray. It should cause our hearts to ache when people fail to welcome Christ and his message of truth. And if we must part company with others over matters of faith, we do it in the hope and prayer that they will come to see the truth. Our task is to speak the truth in love, present Christ to the world, trust in the Lord, accept the hardships and opposition we face as did Jesus, and leave matters of judgment to him.

The disciples were probably still grouching about having to keep on going to find another place to stay, when up comes another would-be disciple who announces, "Lead on, Jesus. *I'll* follow you wherever you go." Well, here we go now. *That* sounds like the right kind of attitude. It seems he's willing to accept whatever sacrifices he'll have to endure and hang in there with Jesus to the bitter end.

And yet we detect a certain note of over confidence in his professed loyalty; rather like Peter on the night of Jesus' arrest when he said, "I'll never leave you Lord. Oh no, not me!" It's born of reliance on personal strength and ability rather than on Christ and his Word. Peter's boast turned out to be a lot of hot air. And this man's boast too seems to be an empty effort to impress Jesus with his devotion. In Jesus' response to him, we see that the Lord has detected something else going on. When the fellow says, "I'll follow you *anywhere*", he has a certain "anywhere" in mind. He sees Jesus in the same way as did many Jews of his day: as an earthly Messiah who would set up a glorious kingdom in this world. So he expects that as he follows Jesus, there may be some hardships on the road to glory, maybe a few trying setbacks; but eventually (and the sooner the better) he will reach the goal. Then life will be a bowl of cherries. He'll be able to kick back, take it easy, and sit by the pool tanning himself in the radiance of the Lord's glory.

Jesus disallows any such notions when he tells him, "...the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." We are strangers and pilgrims here. We are just passing through. We keep moving forward. The hardships and struggles will continue. The glorious goal and kingdom we seek does not belong to this present age.

This is hard for Jesus' followers to accept even today. We want to believe that sometime after we sign on (soon, we hope), we will (largely by our own efforts) reach the goal. We will have arrived at spiritual completion. And when we get there we will be able to give our spirits rest. We can relax. No need to keep growing in the Lord and moving forward. For some it happens at confirmation. For others it comes a bit later in life; but the idea is the same: "I'm done. I've arrived. Now that I'm "fully a Christian" there's nothing to do now but wait for Christ to come again." By telling us that there's no place to lay his head, the Lord enjoins us to continue to follow him *throughout* our lives. He wants us to keep growing in him through the study of his Word, and to keep struggling in our walk of faith. He wants us to continue to learn to overcome sin and temptation, and to increasingly come to rely on him and his strength to see us through to the end.

All right, at this point, Jesus has dealt with two bad examples of discipleship that we might describe as being overzealous or overly confident. The people involved very much *want* to follow Jesus; but they do it with wrong-headed methods and goals. Now Jesus turns his attention to two rather under-motivated approaches.

First, he steps up to another fellow and directs him to "Follow me". And the man responds, "Sure Jesus, I'd love to follow you ... but not right now. First let me go bury my father." To this we might expect the very compassionate Jesus to respond, "Oh, I'm so sorry to hear about your loss. Yes, by all means, go bury your father. Take as much time as you need. And then when you feel up to it, come follow me." Everyone in the world understands that a funeral, especially the funeral of a close family member, takes precedence over anything else. Everyone understands that—everyone except Jesus, that is.

"Let the dead bury their dead. You go proclaim the kingdom of God." Whoa! That's harsh. And if it sounds offensive to you, you should know that to the original hearers it would have been even more shocking. In that day the social customs that were considered a person's bare minimum duty to a deceased parent were far more involved than the sorts of things we do today. There would have been weeks of formal mourning that included wearing special clothes, fasting, and so on. And if you failed to do these things, it would have been interpreted as the height of disrespect. But here it appears as if Jesus is saying, "Forget all that. Following me is more important."

That's exactly right: following Jesus *is* more important than anything else. It really is a matter of eternal life and death. That's the point. And that's why Jesus makes it with what everybody understood to be the perfect alibi. If going to bury your dead father doesn't count as an excuse to delay following Jesus, then nothing does. And yet, it doesn't stop us from trying other excuses, does it? Most of us know people who claim that they are planning to begin walking with the Lord one of these days; but they've got all these other important, pressing duties to take care of first—"but just as soon as they're out of the way ...". And of course, we don't have to look at others to find this problem. If we examine ourselves, we will find areas in our own lives where we know we are not following Jesus as we should; but that we are "planning to commit to the Lord one of these days." Funny how "that day" never comes, isn't it?

But I also want you to see that Jesus doesn't tell this fellow *not* to go bury his father. What he tells him is to "go and proclaim kingdom of God." He is to be a follower of Jesus while he goes to bury his father. He is to proclaim life in Jesus in the midst of death and his family's grief. Sometimes we get it into our heads that following Jesus means dropping everything, selling the farm, shaving our heads, and joining a monastery; or that to truly follow Christ we need to become missionaries in deepest, darkest Africa. Those are ways to follow Jesus, it's true; but here Jesus directs this man to follow him within his present circumstances. It's wrong to think that they are mutually exclusive. We are called to follow every day *within* our vocations. We are to follow Jesus while fulfilling our obligations to family and friends. We follow Jesus while we perform the duties of husbands, wives, parents, and children. We follow him in our careers as farmers, factory workers, secretaries, or whatever else we do. We follow him by living lives that in every way, in what we say and do, proclaim his victory over sin and death.

And now we come to the last bad example: another volunteer steps forward and announces, "I'll follow you Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family." This seems like a reasonable request. But here again, Jesus detects an ulterior motive. The man has divided loyalties. His heart is torn between staying in his former life and moving forward with Jesus. He wants to keep looking over his shoulder at what he left behind—rather like Lot's wife who couldn't let go of what she was leaving even though it was doomed to destruction. Jesus tells him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit for service in the kingdom."

There are several reasons for this. First, a disciple of Jesus can't have half his focus fixed on his former life without Christ and still move forward with him in a straight path. If he keeps thinking about what he's left behind, if part of his heart is still entangled in sins and lusts that should have been discarded, he will stray all over the place. The field will look like a drunken man plowed in it. The second problem is that those who keep looking back tend to focus on how far they've come rather than on how far they have yet to go. This is a spiritual danger because our natural tendency is to congratulate ourselves on the progress we've made. "Wow, since I started following Jesus, just look at all that I have accomplished! I guess I can let up a bit." It doesn't work that way. True growth in Christ is characterized by looking ahead toward the goal and seeing how much more there is to do—which is always more than we thought. As we follow Jesus, we become more acutely aware of how sinful we really are, how little we know him, and how much more we need to rely on his grace and forgiveness if we are to arrive at the goal. To be his followers, we must keep our focus forward.

And so now we've seen a total of four bad examples of Christian discipleship: one judgmental and lacking compassion, one prideful and self-reliant, one looking for excuses not to fully commit, and finally one with divided loyalties. All of them are bad examples indeed; but bad examples serve good purposes: they show us what not to be. So let's examine ourselves with brutal honesty to consider in what ways we have been guilty of condemning others and wishing destruction upon them, of imagining that we've come far enough already in our walk of faith, of holding back and making a less than complete commitment to following Jesus, and of constantly looking back rather than forward in our walk of faith. And confessing our failures to our heavenly Father and trusting in his mercy to us in Jesus his Son, who set his face toward Jerusalem and followed through with all that was asked of him to secure our salvation, let us likewise set our faces toward following Jesus faithfully. Doing so, he will forgive our sins and strengthen us with his Spirit to follow as good disciples should – through life, through death, and to our heavenly goal. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!