

“Moving On Up” - Luke 9:51-62 – June 26, 2016

China’s Chairman Mao made famous an ancient Chinese proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step”. There is a significant truth in that saying, a truth that is relatively easy to understand – no matter how long, how arduous a journey it will not be accomplished without that first step. In our gospel reading today we see the first step in the most significant journey of our faith, that fateful first step of Jesus toward Jerusalem, toward the cross, toward the tomb, toward the resurrection.

Just as the first step that we take in a journey tends to set the tone and the nature of the trip, so too does this first step. The tone here in this episode is serious, reflecting not only the trials and pain to come but also the huge significance of this particular journey. The text tells us Jesus “sets his face to go to Jerusalem.” We can readily understand that this means that Jesus turned in the direction of that City of God, but there is also a strong hint here that “sets his face” is the action of assuming a mask of determination.

I think the disciples caught that mood of seriousness from the determined look on Jesus’ face. They must have sensed that this was no ordinary journey; they surely recognized this was not like the quiet ambles through the Palestinian grain fields on a sunny day, helping themselves to do-it-yourself trail mix. This was no casual stroll down dusty highways, roaming where the Spirit willed, meeting and greeting, talking and teaching, helping and healing. This looming journey begun with a determined step was now a trek with a purpose, a mission, a calling, and it was deadly serious.

No longer relying upon whatever accommodations turned up, this serious sojourn to the Holy City now called for advanced preparation. The air was filled with purpose, with intent, with a sense of divine destiny. The disciples caught that intense mood, and I’m certain that they were excited as well. Reacting to Jesus’ seriousness, they couldn’t help being a bit nervous, full of eager anticipation at the events that would now unfold. Filled with fresh experiences that confirmed their teacher and leader as the Messiah, the disciples could almost taste the adoring reactions of the crowds as they made their trek to and into the Holy City.

Perhaps that might explain their reaction to the Samaritans, who didn’t seem to catch or to share the seriousness of Jesus’ purpose – or maybe they did get it but didn’t want to get dragged into it. All we know is that the Samaritans “did not receive Jesus” because his face was set to go to Jerusalem. To the disciples, this was unthinkable. Here they were offering the Samaritans the opportunity to host the Son of Man, their teacher so obviously connected with and filled with the power of God. How could these Samaritans not understand? How could they be so foolish as not to leap at the opportunity to accept the Son of Man into their midst, to welcome him into their homes and hearts?

In some ways we can understand the disciples’ confusion. Their mission has moved to a new level, but already it’s going off the rails. Instead of the cheering, adoring crowds they anticipated, they encountered instead rejection, cold shoulders, averted eyes and “sorry, no rooms here”. The disciples were crushed. Responding in anger they demanded of Jesus, “Do you want us to nuke them?” Discouraged, James and John asked Jesus in more biblical terms, “Do you want us to call down fire and brimstone upon their heads?” – their anger revealing their underlying fears.

I think we can understand the disciples’ reaction but I think we can also understand why Jesus rebuked them. Jesus had great compassion for those who had trouble accepting who he was and what his mission was, and we can easily imagine him telling the disciples to “chill”, to hold back, and not to get all cranked over the Samaritans not rushing to embrace him.

However, the issues with the Samaritans are not the main focus of this incident in Luke's gospel. The encounters with the next three individuals provide a powerful counter-example, showing that while Jesus had patience with those who could declare they had trouble following him, he had much less patience with those who claimed they would follow him but wound up instead sitting on their "but's" – not the "double-'T' kind of butt, but instead the kind of "but" that accompanies the opening phrase, "I would, but ..."!

To the first anonymous stranger on the road who declared undying loyalty, Jesus replied with an answer that makes it clear that this 'someone' obviously was expecting acclaim and a soft life in exchange for that loyalty. Jesus drew a bleak picture that emphasised that even the animals would have it better than the Son of Man.

To the second 'someone' who responded to Jesus' call to follow him with "I would, but first let me bury my father" Jesus gave a short and curt reply about priorities: "Let the dead bury their own dead." We who proclaim Jesus as the bringer of life abundant and eternal hear his answer as referring to those who do not choose to accept that life he offers.

However, it is in reply to the third 'someone' who also responded to Jesus' call to follow with "I would, but ..." that we hear some frustration from Jesus. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Now I think we need to be careful here, for there is a great tendency by people to immediately jump to hearing that anyone who professes faith in Jesus but who wavers with doubts is somehow condemned and can never enter the kingdom. We need to be careful about falling into that trap, for it is exactly the same trap into which the disciples fell over the Samaritans – and for which they were rebuked by Jesus!

The analogy about looking back while plowing is largely lost on today's generation, and is largely lost on many churches as well. If you have ever plowed, you know that looking back while doing so will automatically cause you to veer off course, and your furrows will be neither straight nor parallel. To plow properly you must keep your bearings by looking forward and trusting that the outcome will be what you wanted. How many congregations find themselves going off track by constantly looking back to "the good old days" – so much so in many cases that they wind up going in circles? How many people feel the call from God to move forward in some new way, but since looking forward to the changes makes most people uncomfortable they prefer to and do so look back to times and ways that are familiar, yet deadening?

On the other hand, those who hear and heed Jesus' message about not looking back sometimes need to look back to the example of the Samaritan village to keep from rejecting those who cannot yet jump on board with the same zeal and enthusiasm and strength of vision and purpose. Sadly we don't have to look very far in Christianity today to see expressions of "nuke 'em" towards those who, like the Samaritans, don't respond with the anticipated excitement and response. People who are fresh in their faith, who have just turned to walk with Jesus, who have just set their faces toward Jerusalem, who have just taken the first step in their tough journey of faith often react with the same kind of harshness towards those who don't respond with what they feel is the appropriate zest, zeal and enthusiasm.

"But [Jesus] turned and rebuked them", the text tells us, and it should be clear that such a harsh, unforgiving response was, and is, not appropriate. There isn't any description as to what the rebuke was like, and there aren't even any details as to how the disciples felt or reacted to the rebuke – we only know that they simply went on to another village. Was it a Samaritan village? Probably, possibly, who knows? The point is not that these were Samaritans; neither is the point about Jews and Gentiles, for soon the disciples and the crowds would hear the example of the good Samaritan who was the only one who displayed true faith in helping the beaten stranger on

the road. The point was that faith journeys, serious journeys, even such a journey as the one Jesus set out upon on the way to Jerusalem, to the cross, to death and resurrection often begin with challenges. While we are enjoined by Jesus to keep our eyes on the goal, we are also cautioned against harshly and piously judging and mistreating those who cannot or do not focus as clearly on our vision as we do; indeed we are called to be compassionate towards them.

Blessedly, not all of us are called to a trek in faith as tough as the one Jesus and the disciples set out on. In fact, because Jesus set his face to Jerusalem, and did not waver but carried right on to the cross, to the tomb, and beyond to the resurrection, we are spared the worst of the journey. He has gone before us, and prepared the way, so that our trip is not nearly so tough, and for that we are grateful. To be sure, there are moments in our journey of faith that are tough, times when we are hassled by family, friend and stranger for our choice of path. There are, and will inevitably be, tough spots on the road, times when we wonder if we have lost our way, occasions when challenges arise that make us wonder if this is really the path we are called to be on, times even when the road dips down through the valley of the shadow of death.

But there are also wondrous moments on this road of redemption, glorious mornings of sunshine glistening in the fresh dew on the leaves; magnificent vistas of grand beauty, and just a peek at the far-off kingdom goal, like the first steps in building up when the excavation has finished. There are moments of sharing as we meet fellow travelers on this road, and as it slopes gently we walk arm-in-arm sharing tales and experiences and mutual respect and love. There are times when we will be breathless at the view; other times when we are breathless at the challenge; yet most times the going is easy and pleasant, walking on a path made wide and level by the Son of God who has gone before us, preparing the way.

On this leg of the journey we are strengthened and encouraged and excited as we begin to see more clearly the magnificent future that is unfolding before us, and we give thanks to God for calling us on this journey with Christ, and for the Holy Spirit giving us strength and purpose to make the trip faithfully.