

Luke 9:51-62 – “Tough Trip”

I believe it was Chairman Mao who quoted a Chinese proverb, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step”, and 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. And here 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.

And just as the first step that we take in a journey tends to set the tone, the nature of the trip, so too does this first step. The tone is serious, reflecting not only the trials and pain to come, but also the huge significance of this particular journey. 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 seems also a sense in this expression “sets his face” of assuming a mask of determination – much like us amateur Grinders in the first quarter of that arduous climb.

I think the disciples caught the mood of seriousness from the determined look on Jesus’ face. They must have sensed that this was no ordinary journey, no quiet amble 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 was now a trek with a purpose, a mission, a calling, and it was deathly 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, and the disciples caught the 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 would explain their reaction to the Samaritans, who didn’t seem to catch or share the seriousness of Jesus’ purpose – or maybe they did, and 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?

Here they were having taking the first step of their journey, and it’s already going wrong. The first encounter did not result in cheering, adoring crowds, but in rejection, in cold shoulders, in averted eyes and “sorry, no rooms here”. The disciples were crushed. They reacted in anger, asking Jesus, “Do you want us to nuke them?” Discouraged, James and John asked Jesus. “Do you want us to call down fire and brimstone upon their heads?”, their anger revealing their underlying fears. We can understand that fear, that angry response, can’t we? Whenever we’ve set off on a long, tough trip, and things have started to go wrong at the very beginning, we feel the same sense of fear and anger, don’t we? A few years ago Elizabeth and I set out on a trip across Canada and had exactly that kind of an experience. I had just finished a year-and-a-half stint as the interim minister in Chilliwack, and decided to take a vacation and see the country. I had an old diesel Ranger truck at the time that had over 500,000 Km on it, and we bought a little Okanogan camper to put on it. We set out on this five-week adventure filled with excitement and more than a little nervous. I was especially nervous about whether this old truck would make it all the way across Canada – and back!

We made it to Hope, and began the climb on old Highway 3 – grinding slowly up the hills with the engine roaring in low gear, and finally over the crest and down into Princeton. I can’t remember if

we stopped in Princeton, but I clearly remember heading across the bridge and out of town, rolling eastward on a sunny day, feeling at last like our trip had really begun. I also remember with great clarity looking down at the instrument panel, and seeing the oil pressure gauge sitting hard at zero! Now I have a lot of experience with engines, and old engines, and engines in their final gasps of life, and even though this engine wasn't making the kind of noises I would expect to hear with no oil pressure (grinding, squealing, knocking, I'm-about-to-seize kind of noises), zero oil pressure is still a very, very bad thing. I did the only thing possible, and that was to immediately stop on the side of the road, and call for a tow-truck.

Just like the disciples, whose tough trip had also gone sour at the very first step, I was afraid, and angry. Afraid that the engine was ruined, angry that the trip was cancelled. A bit relieved that this kind of catastrophe hadn't happened in Ontario, or Newfoundland, but fearful and angry just the same. I can truly appreciate why the disciples wanted to rain fire and brimstone down on the Samaritans, for I was willing to do the same to our poor old truck and camper.

Our experience and the disciples' had a further parallel. The tow-truck finally arrived and hauled us back to the nearest garage on the east edge of Princeton, and since it was after closing time we camped in their parking lot overnight. The next morning I met the mechanic, and explained what had happened, and his face showed he agreed with the seriousness of the problem. However, as it turned out, it was not a serious problem after all – there was a plastic line from the engine to the oil pressure gauge, and that line had been touching the turbocharger which must have gotten super hot on the long climb up the pass, and there was a hole in the line. The whole exercise to fix it took less than an hour, and not much more than \$50.

Fortunately, the mechanic didn't rebuke me for wanting to rain down fire and brimstone on the poor old truck in my fear and anger, but the disciples didn't get off so easy, as Jesus rebuked them for wanting to do the same on the poor folks in that town in Samaria. Jesus set the tone for the rest of the tough trip to come, turning and rebuking the disciples for reacting so harshly to this early setback on this most important journey.

That really is a point worth dwelling on, isn't it? After all, isn't the reaction of the disciples the same kind of reaction we feel when we experience a setback at the start of a journey? Certainly we feel the same emotions and reactions when a trip like ours in the old camper goes sour, but isn't it also an all-too-common experience in our faith journeys? I suspect we can remember seeing such experiences in others, even if we can't readily admit seeing it in ourselves. Indeed, 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 to the eager disciples. 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 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 start with a problem, and we should not

be discouraged by such problems, nor should we react harshly to those who are not yet ready to set out on the same pilgrimage with the same enthusiasm as we have.

Not only is such early and immature enthusiasm inappropriate, Jesus also went on to warn his disciples, and us, that such enthusiasm will quickly fade on a trip as tough as the one he was calling them, and us, to join on. Eager and cheerful declarations of “I’m ready!”, “I will follow you!” were met with cautions that the trip would not be easy. It would not be a life of ease and comfort, but an uncertain, nomadic lifestyle, with no fixed place of comfort to lie down and recuperate. The journey of faith would be a tough one, calling for a focus and intent that superceded even family obligations. It would be a trip that would call for every effort in keeping one’s eye on the destination, with neither chance nor excuse for looking back, especially with longing.

Not all of us are called to a trip 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 journey of faith. There are, and will inevitably be, tough spots on the road, times when we wonder if we have lost our way, if this is really the path we want to be on, times 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 tips of the mountains coming into view as you head west in Alberta. 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; and yet other times when the going is easy, walking on a path made wide and level by the Son of God who has gone before us, preparing the way.

That’s how our cross-Canada trip turned out, by the way. After the initial problem and challenge, we carried on all the way to Cape Spear. Yes, there were more challenges, like the time the headlights failed in the absolute darkness outside of Brandon, Manitoba on the way home, and like the time we ran out of fuel in the middle of Newfoundland (fortunately we coasted to within three feet of the only diesel pump for a hundred miles in any direction!). But there were also times of breathless grandeur, and countless friendly pilgrims along the way. It was a tough trip, but a trip not to be missed!

This trip of faith, joining as a disciple of Jesus, is also a tough trip, but likewise a trip not to be missed. In spite of the challenges, this trip of faith calls us to a journey with sights and sounds and experiences beyond our wildest imaginations, and calls us to a destination that is worth the effort. This tough trip of faith leads us to a land not only promised, but delivered and sealed by Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God, who has perfectly made the journey ahead of us, and who now reaches out a hand to help us over the rough spots, and to share the joy of the wondrous times. It’s a tough trip, but well worth it, this journey of faith with Jesus, our Lord.