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THE SCRIPTURE
Luke 9:51-62 (*The Message*)

When it came close to the time for his Ascension, he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead. They came to a Samaritan village to make arrangements for his hospitality. But when the Samaritans learned that his destination was Jerusalem, they refused hospitality. When the disciples James and John learned of it, they said, “Master, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate them?” Jesus turned on them: “Of course not!” And they traveled on to another village. On the road someone asked if he could go along. “I’ll go with you, wherever,” he said. Jesus was curt: “Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know.” Jesus said to another, “Follow me.” He said, “Certainly, but first excuse me for a couple of days, please. I have to make arrangements for my father’s funeral.” Jesus refused. “First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God’s kingdom!” Then another said, “I’m ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home.” Jesus said, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.”

THE MESSAGE
“{UN} Series: Problematic Predictions”
Mark Briley

I’ve learned two important lessons in my life. I can’t recall the first one, but the second one is that I need to start writing stuff down.

It's the nature of life, I suppose. One moment, we see the future so clearly and the next moment we've lost our cell phone for the third time in a day. "*Hey! Have you seen my cell phone?*" More often than not, it's more of a, "*Hey! Why did you move my cell phone?*" assuming we couldn't have possibly misplaced it all by ourselves. We laugh with some friends, who when something is misplaced in their household, the exasperated accusation when what is lost can't be found is, "*So I suppose there's a ghost in the house!*"

It's fascinating, isn't it? The ways we can hold all these realities at the same time? And the more I think I know, the more I realize how little I know. I've grown more comfortable with the humbling phrase, "*I could be wrong.*" It floors me how some people are so sure about everything. Such confidence is maybe even beyond a casual prediction about the future. There have long been failed predictions. A prediction by definition, after all, is simply expressing an *idea* of what could happen in the future. Who knows what the future holds?

As Jesus turned his focus to the conflict to come in Jerusalem, he lost patience with many who predicted that following Jesus would lead to an ordinary, predictable lifestyle. As each casual would-be-follower said to Jesus, "*I'll follow but...*" Jesus responded with a reason their predictable hopes would not be met.

Coming out of a two-year-pandemic that we initially predicted would require only a couple-week halt to business-as-usual, we're all wondering how history will mark this season. As followers of Jesus, how must we adapt to this new-look society? It's fair to say it will be anything but predictable. So then... what are we called to do in this season when life seems less stable, less predictable? Jesus might say, "*Set your face to the goal.*"

Dr. Luke, our Gospel companion today, writes this about Jesus in this pivotal moment of his life. There is a seismic shift in Jesus' focus in this very passage, and everything that happens after this pivotal point can only be seen through the lens of his focus. Jesus has been doing some amazing things... teaching, and healing, and hittin' up some weddings, and messin' around at the park playing Double Dutch with the neighborhood kids. But those three words, "*Set his face*" change everything.

It's an idiom we catch in the First Testament on several occasions which may be why Luke chooses it here. Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. It essentially means Jesus got real clear about what was coming. It was a moment of complete and absolute clarity. The showdown we easily see from our vantage point but couldn't be predicted by those intrigued by Jesus at that time, was fully in Jesus' view. The cross was coming, and Jesus knew time was shrinking. All the while, everyone else was as

seemingly scattered as ever and constantly trying to remember where they put their cell phones.

If you've ever had to face your own death or that of someone you love... or if you've received a life-altering diagnosis or been in a terrible accident... you have a sense of this clarity. Your world has stopped, you see things more clearly than ever, and the people around you are still caught up in daily inconsequential distractions maybe like you were, too, before things became utterly clear about what matters most.

I have a friend whose only child graduated from high school this year and is soon off to college. She posted her regret this week: *"I regret all the time I spent working for people, who didn't really care about me. I regret all the time I spent meeting other peoples' needs instead of spending time with him. I regret thinking I had to make more money to make him happy. I regret all the missed giggles, hugs, talks.....I regret the missed TIME."*

Do you know these moments? Times when you set your face so clearly on what the focus will be moving forward? What this opens today for Jesus, is four edgy encounters with others that in some ways seem insensitive and out of character.

Disciples James and John go on ahead of Jesus to book a room at the Super 8 Motel in Samaria, but there's no room in the Inn... sound familiar? So, they ask around about VRBOs and Bed and Breakfast options, and as everyone learns the request is lodging for Jesus on his way to Jerusalem – they say, *"Nah. Ain't got no space for you."* Samaritans and Jews weren't the best of friends, you know? So, no hospitality was extended.

Hospitality may be a gift we are losing as a society. We assume a lot about people. Or maybe we don't have to assume. There was a time when we had to get to know people first ... become invested friends even... before we knew all their opinions about issues, beliefs, politics, etc. By then, we already liked them and saw them as a real human person with real experiences that shaped their understanding. In this social media, 24-hour news cycle age, we know everyone's opinions about everything before we engage them in person and just decide there is no need. Some might say, *"Well that just saves time that would have been wasted on someone with whom I was not going to get along."* Perhaps. Or it could be saying *"Nah... ain't got no time for you... and that person being Jesus looking for a way into your life."* It's tricky, tricky, tricky, tricky, and I don't pretend to have it all figured out. I just know sometimes we get turned off by the labels we put on people before we try to simply love them as humans.

This is the challenge of Christian hospitality: to embrace all people as God has embraced us in Christ. In Le Chambon [*writes Professor Christine Pohl*], a small

community of French Protestants that rescued Jews during the Second World War, citizens opened their homes, schools, and churches to strangers with quiet, steady hospitality, and made Le Chambon the safest place for Jews in all of France. Residents defined a neighbor as anyone who needed help, and by doing so saved the lives of approximately 5,000 people being persecuted by the Nazis. When the police asked their pastor André Trocmé to turn in the Jews, he responded, “*We do not know what a Jew is. We know only humans.*”¹

This was how the Church created safe space for all people – people who were different than them, who didn’t believe the same things as them... and yet were created in God’s image, just like them.

It’s why in this Pride Month, we want our friends and neighbors and siblings and children and grandchildren in the LGBTQ+ family to know we are a safe space for you and with you because of our faith in Christ and the love we are called to share with one another. No condemnation.

And even widening the circle now, if you feel your safety as a woman, or your safety in your identity or in your marriage is at risk, you need to know that your concerns are recognized and are safe with our broad hearts. It’s not about politics. It’s about Jesus. It’s not that the Protestant Christians of Le Chambon were all going to convert to Judaism... not at all... they were simply called by their faith to value the sacredness and identity of their neighbors... for God made them, loves them, and Christ said, “*As you do to them, you do to me.*”

Don’t choose issues; choose people. No matter your personal opinions about judicial decisions made this week, many people are now hurting and scared and as a follower of Jesus, we don’t celebrate others fear or pain... we demonstrate our faith by the way we love those who are hurting. They will not know we are Christian by our opinions. They’ll know we are Christian by our love.

James and John... good dudes... well-meaning followers... and members of the Executive Committee, still get it wrong. Their assumption and ultimate problematic prediction was that Jesus was going to want them to burn down that whole village in Samaria. They were like, “*Jesus, you good if we just cancel this village? If we just wipe ‘em out? If we just burn this place down?*” Jesus is all, “*As if! Seriously? Of course not.*”

¹—Henry G. Brinton, *The Welcoming Congregation: Roots and Fruits of Christian Hospitality* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 14. This was found as an animating illustration from the publication, Homiletics Online. Brian Kaylor, pastor, and lead writer also inspired the title, Problematic Predictions in connection with this Lukan passage. His influence is noted and honored in this message.

Maybe you've assumed the same when it comes to the "Other" political party... those are the ads we're seeing these days and they're only going to get worse. Jesus says, "*Absolutely not.*" Violence is never the answer. Peter chops off a guy's ear who is trying to arrest Jesus later in the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus puts that ear right back on the side of the guy's face. Jesus has his face set toward Jerusalem. Where have you set your focus?

The crew moves on, and we get the accounts of three would-be-followers and their three assumptions, or predictions, about Jesus' response to them. The first would-be-follower hears Jesus teach and feels really motivated to get on board. He says, "*I'll follow you wherever you go, Jesus!*" And Jesus says, "*We're not staying in nice places and eating the best food. It's not all that comfortable... we're not even glamping.*" And the guy slowly backs away because, like most of us, he loves to slip into his own bed at home each night.

Another would-be-disciple seems interested, and Jesus says, "*Follow me.*" and the guy's all on board but he says, "*I've got this funeral first, and then I'll catch up with you.*" Jesus says to the grieving man, "*No time for that. We've got life to proclaim.*" This seems insensitive to me.

But then a third would-be-follower: "*I checked the box on the Connection Card next to the 'interested in church membership' line. I'm down for this but let me go say goodbye to my peeps first so they don't think I've ghosted them. Plus, I need to get my phone charger.*" Seems reasonable but again, Jesus says, "*You spend your life looking over your shoulder, you run into the pole every time. Forward or nothing.*"

Is this a human moment Jesus has; I wonder? He stops and takes time for people all the time... children... he says, "*Let them come to me. Don't shoo them away.*" He stops and heals a woman just because he felt a tug on his cloak. When Mary and Martha send a message on the group text chat to Jesus that their brother, Jesus' best friend Lazarus, is dying and would he get there while there's still time, he stays where he is for a couple of days – in no rush – maybe taking care of some dry cleaning and not missing poker night with his friend group. Is it just that Jesus' has turned his face to Jerusalem – he knows death is coming and therefore literally doesn't have time for one to go to a funeral or another to go home and kiss his mother goodbye because his own death is just around the corner? You get real clear and don't have time to fuss around with other people's hesitations. This could be.

I think we've seen some of this through the pandemic. Folks have lost tolerance for people not on their same wavelength and direction. And I get it. I see it for our Church... the comfort or drift back into our comforts is nice, but does the movement of Christ have time to just ride it all out or do we need to focus in new ways on where love

is leading and make the needed calls to lead us forward in this new world we live in? It's hard.

But it seems Jesus is saying, "*A future with me is very different from the past.*" It doesn't negate all the formative realities of the past... they may have been right on, meaningful, transformative... shaped lives in ways we never imagined. But if we're lost in nostalgia, we may miss what Jesus is leading us to next. "*Can't change,*" they said. "*Church will never be like that,*" they said. Of course, this is what many people said about the way we've been doing church here for more than six decades.

It's like a man who wrote about airplanes in the March 1904 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*. He said, "*The machines will eventually be fast, they will be used in sport, but they are not to be thought of as commercial carriers.*" That prediction fell short. Now, around the globe, roughly 100,000 flights take off and land every day... maybe a few less right now. ☹️. Jesus is calling his followers to look towards a new way of life, one that is hard to predict with any accuracy over and above our answer to the question, "*What does love require?*"

I don't know if it was Jesus' best day when he said these things to those who had interest in following him if they could take care of some personal stuff first. Maybe that was just the radical reality of Jesus focus that is expected of us, too. My heart says, "*Jesus is compassionate,*" and that he leans into that compassion 99% of the time. But here? Maybe he's saying, "*Hey ... you all are overly distracted.*" And I can say, "*Amen!*" to that. I'm constantly turning around and saying, "*What about that need? What about that issue? What about that person? What about that tradition? What about that shortfall? What about that program? What about that thing that we've done over and over again?*" Maybe Jesus would look me in the heart and say, "*Bro... are you not looking forward? Do you not see the writing on the wall? Can you not leave it and follow me?*"

We put our dog, Taylor, through puppy training school during the pandemic, and I think the primary thing that came out of the training for our family was one of the five of us... or sometimes all five of the five of us yelling at Taylor, "*Leave it! Leave it!*" And does Taylor "*Leave it?*" No. She does not. Jesus may be saying, "*Leave it, Church!*" Slim it down... get back to the basics and focus on those elements instead of trying to maintain all the things.

I'm not sure what lays around the bend for us, friends. There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "*May you live in interesting times.*" Check that box right off. Barbara

Kingsolver says, “*The writing has been on the wall for some years now, but we are a nation illiterate in the language of the wall. The writing just gets bigger.*”²

Can we see it? God, will you help us see it? More than any previous generation, I believe we’re being stretched beyond what’s familiar. Sometimes that is both painful and disorienting. It’s not easy to have our boundaries, values, and ideas under constant redefinition. But here we are in this mysterious and often confusing season of our lives. In the midst of it all, what is Jesus trying to teach us? It may be to get clear about what love requires and then step boldly into that future.

I danced at a wedding last night. I saw a man and a woman – more seasoned in life than many of the younger newlyweds I have often wed – stand before God, their family and friends and say, “*I know what I’m choosing today and I’m all in.*” It’s not perfect and nothing easy is promised. But it was focused and clear and it was beautiful. Their eyes, and their hearts, told the story... they’re pressing forward, and that’s the only way to realize the love of God we are called to dwell within and share. And so, I danced at the wedding. I wasn’t great, but it didn’t matter.

In all of Jesus’ hurry and focus of this passage, it was also Jesus who said, “*The bridegroom will only be with you a little while, so I hope you’ll dance at the wedding.*”

Friends, we’ve got some pages to turn... we’ve got some clarity to take hold of and live forward courageously. And I’m not scared. Are you? I’m really not. I don’t have all the answers, but I know there’s something real and authentic and transformative ahead of us if we’ll just set our faces on the future – and be bold enough to follow Jesus into it. Don’t get lost in the chaos, waste your time on problematic predictions, or drown in the outrage. Just love well; serve humbly; and trust that Jesus is leading us just as he promised.

A SONG OF FOCUS

Seize the Day!

(Luke 9:62 MSG)

MUSIC: ED VARNUM

1. Christ called out to all who’d hear,
“Come now and follow me.
Release your worries and your fears,
and I will set you free!”
Some told him, “I have many things
that I must do today.

² Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder: Essays* (Harper Collins, 2009).

I promise, Lord, when these are through,
I'll follow in your way."

2. But we cannot be certain
of what tomorrow brings,
if dancing or if grieving in silence or to sing.
And if you think it's certain tomorrow is foretold,
you will likely be surprised at
what tomorrow holds.

Refrain:

So, press on in the work of Christ,
don't falter, wander, stray!
Don't put off till tomorrow to follow in Christ's way.
Procrastination, backward looks
must all be kept at bay.
Don't delay! This is the moment! Seize the day!

3. And if you hear the words of Christ,
"This is my will for you,"
The time is now to answer him,
"Yes, that is what I'll do."
Don't put off till tomorrow to answer and obey.
Don't delay! Take this moment to follow:
SEIZE THE DAY!

Refrain:

So, press on in the work of Christ,
don't falter, wander, stray!
Don't put off till tomorrow to follow in Christ's way.
Procrastination, backward looks
must all be kept at bay.
Don't delay! This is the moment! Seize the day!

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH