

I Confirm

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, June 26, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Luke 9:57-62](#)

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It amazes me that people have time to do this sort of thing. Imagine going through the four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – looking for question marks. Apparently someone did and (at least according to the tweet¹ by a published author): Jesus was asked 187 questions. He answered (at least sorta) 8 of them. He asked others 307 questions of others.

I heard from a reliable source² that someone else (a pastor from Australia in this case) scoured the gospels looking for dominant themes and, in the process, discovered that Jesus says “Follow me” 87 times. Today’s scripture reading includes one, and maybe three (depending on how this Australian pastor did his counting; I haven’t checked his math), of the 87 times Jesus extends this invitation.

I know of a couple, one of whom charges the other one dollar every time the other shares a useless factoid. Before I get charged two dollars, let me argue for the usefulness of these factoids.

First, the statistics about questions. I think that Jesus apparent comfort, perhaps even supreme comfort with unanswered questions might encourage us to be the same way. Maybe the questions we ask are more important than the answers we find. Maybe Jesus thinks wrestling with questions is important, an important part of being faithful. And maybe the fact that Jesus answers less than 5% of the questions he is asked can remind us that, if we are staying faithful, our answers won’t be static, that if we’re staying faithful, the answers we find to our questions may evolve as our faith evolves.

Second, the statistic about Jesus regularly extending the invitation to follow him. Let’s look at this by digging in a little deeper into today’s scripture reading.

This first thing I notice in this scripture is this strange phrase “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” I think this is a peculiar way to say that his focus was now on Jerusalem and getting there, though in a poetic way. I imagine Jesus being so determined to get to Jerusalem to do what he would do there that you could see it on his face.

Jesus needs to travel through the area where the Samaritans live in order to get to Jerusalem. Jesus sends an advance team to make things ready in the next village for him on his way to Jerusalem, and the Samaritans living there won’t receive him “because his face was set toward Jerusalem.”

¹ Kevin Nye, *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/kevinmnye1/status/1538578040917086208> (posted 16 June 2022; accessed 25 June 2022).

² Bryan Sirchio, “Follow Me (87 Times)”, *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/CATYMkrLvL4> (posted 14 November 2015; accessed (again) 25 June 2022).

I can only guess as to why this was a big deal for the Samaritans. We know that the Samaritans were the descendants of Jews and Assyrians who occupied part of the nation of Israel years earlier. Jews and Samaritans had theological squabbles and, largely speaking, Jews didn't see Samaritans as being true followers of God. One of the things they squabbled about was where the most important place to worship God was. Samaritans said it was Mount Gerizim. Jews said it was Jerusalem. Perhaps the Samaritans thought that Jesus was headed to the wrong center of worship.

The offense that the Samaritans took was expressed with enough vigor that Jesus' disciples James and John (the Sons of Thunder) ask Jesus if he wants them to command fire to come down to consume this village the way Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. If we see the Samaritan's rejection of Jesus as an act of religious intolerance, certainly James and John's response is equally intolerant. Jesus unequivocally says, "No!" And they go on to the next village.

This hostile encounter is easy to forget when we read the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which is recorded in the next chapter. That's too bad, because the reversal in the parable – that the person you think of as unacceptable is the person who turns out to be neighborly – is all the stronger if we remember the hostility expressed here in chapter 9 between Jesus and the Samaritans.

Then we get to the "follow me" section of the reading, which is the part that's important for today. I think in this section we hear, through a trio of warnings, a description about the true nature of discipleship. First, we encounter a volunteer. "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus says that he has nowhere to lay his head, suggesting that following him means living a life of itinerancy.

Next, Jesus invites another person to "follow me." This person says, "Sure thing – right after I've buried my father." Jesus' words to this request seem awfully harsh to me. "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Is Jesus saying that typical social obligations no longer apply when you're one of his followers? Maybe.

The third person he encounters volunteers saying, "I will follow you, right after I say my good-byes." Jesus says that following him means always looking forward, not backward. Again, that seems a bit harsh.

But "taken together and considered in the wake of the drama in the Samaritan village, these three warnings portray discipleship as a striking contrast to conventional, ordinary life: not nestled at home, but on the move through the neighborhood; not bogged down in common duties, but on the move and proclaiming God's reign; not looking backward to the entanglements of the past (including the clannish conventions of 'religious intolerance'), but on the move, opening up, and looking ahead."³

³ SALT Project, "On the Move," <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2022/6/22/on-the-move-salts-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost> (posted 22 June 2022; accessed 23 June 2022).

This is a great passage for a Sunday when we celebrate the Rite of Confirmation. When our youth say, "I confirm," they are claiming an identity as Christians. They are saying, "I am a follower of Jesus, a disciple of Jesus."

This passage reminds us of what being a disciple of Jesus is all about.

First, Jesus warns against religious intolerance. What a refreshing reminder to have, especially in an age when so many people who claim the identity of Christian are so intolerant.

And then Jesus says that being one of his disciples means being active. You can't go hide up in your nest or down in your foxhole. If you're going to be a disciple, you need to be out there, in the neighborhood making a difference. (For what that difference looks like, I'd point you to that parable of the Good Samaritan.)

And then Jesus said that being one of his disciples might mean (at least some of the time) ignoring the social conventions and expectations. Reign of God is counter to social conventions. A guy named Matt Laney once said, "The good news is this: Jesus did not go to the trouble of bringing heaven to earth only to condemn earthlings (see John 3:17) who miss the point. Jesus came to point the way and demonstrate what love looks like on earth as it is in heaven."⁴ That's the future we're looking toward. That's the journey we agree to be on when we say, "I Confirm."

Amen.

⁴ According to some meme I saw somewhere sometime on social media on the Internet.