

Sermon: "But First..."
Luke 9:51-62

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"To another he [Jesus] said 'follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'" (Luke 9:59)

*Let us Pray: What at a time for the church!
We are living in times where faith in God continues to evolve
and be redefined in millions of ways almost on a daily basis.*

I am reminded constantly that there is a group of people who define themselves as "spiritual, but not religious." At first, when I heard this term, I said, "Hey, I'm spiritual, but not religious." It turns out I am not! It turns out I am both. Arguably, one of the characteristics of being "spiritual, but not religious" is to be unaffiliated. This unaffiliated group of individuals are called the "the nones."

The nones are on the rise, according to the Pew Research Center. The Pew Research conducted a survey that found that:

- 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way;
- Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%);
- More than half of them say they believe in nature (58%);
- One in five say they pray every day (21%);
- In addition, most religiously-affiliated Americans believe that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthen community bonds and aiding the poor.

- 88% think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.¹

Thus, I am constantly in prayer asking God - how do we become the church of the nones?

In the Gospel lesson this morning we are not confronted with “the nones.” We are confronted with the “buts.” (Perhaps it is accurate to say that the world has the “nones,” and the church has the “buts.”)

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and during his journey, he has three conversations with anonymous individuals, all around the theme of following him. The first asserts - “I will follow you.” Jesus answers, “Foxes have holes, birds have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”—I cannot offer you riches or financial stability.

The second, Jesus initiates and says “follow me.” Hearing Jesus’ invitation, he indicates that he has to go and bury his father. And here is where we say - that is a reasonable excuse. Thus, we are surprised by Jesus’ answer: “Let the dead, bury the dead.” Some commentaries say that if it was true that his father needed to be buried, what was he doing following Jesus?

But for us, burying the dead may mean leaving the comfort of the known and familiar and moving on to uncharted waters. While this is a challenging time for the church, it is also an exciting and defining time: What is God calling you to do? And if you have felt God’s call, what is holding you back?

What is God calling you to do? There is a sense of urgency, because time does not wait for us. It continues to pass. To leave what we are doing and to enter into a new journey takes courage, determination, and faith. I invite us to consider what it would mean “to let the dead bury its own dead, and to proclaim the kingdom of

¹¹¹ www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.

God.” Lastly, the last sojourner expresses his desire to follow Jesus, but wants to say farewell to those at home. Again, a reasonable request. But Jesus takes this opportunity to allude to what discipleship is all about, and responds: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.”

See ~ following Jesus is not a one-time event. It is a decision that we make for life. Discipleship was Jesus’ long range goal. Jesus did not leave a temple, a synagogue, or an edifice or any kind. Jesus left disciples. But discipleship is costly.

Deitrich Bonhoffer said, “Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship; and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.”² And, Jesus puts the kingdom of God at the center of that discipleship. “Christian discipleship revolved around the hub of kingdom,”³

What is this Kingdom and how do we discern the signs?

*There, where a just order is sought;
there, where human life is respected and a full life is fostered;
there, where women and men live in solidarity;
there, where the structures of society try to favor
“the orphan, the widow and the poor
there, where human beings have the
opportunity to become what God intends
them to be;
THERE, the kingdom of God is at work.*

*On the contrary, there, where the social system is bound to favor a few
In detriment of the majority of the members of society;
there, where Injustices divides and puts people against people;
there, where tutorial regimes curtail freedom and
tread under foot the fundamental rights of people;
THERE, the anti-kingdom is at work.⁴*

² Deitrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: McMillan Co., 1963) , 50-51.

³ Jim Wallis, *Sojourners* (September 1981) 18.

⁴ Mortimer Arias, *Venga tu Reino: La Memoria Subversiva de Jesus* (Mexico City: Casa Unida de Publicaciones, 1980) 163-164.

I pray that we have the courage to live an every-day-discipleship life. I pray that we understand that discipleship is not for the faint of heart, and it takes place in our world.

I submit to you this morning, that we have this one life - this gift that God has given us. This is your time. This is the time when we decide if we are going to follow or if we are going to stay behind burying the dead.

May the Spirit of God, lead us to what God is calling us today, and may we answer "YES." Amen.