

Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 26, 2022

Luke 9:51-62

⁵¹When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The Gospel lesson prompted someone to ask me earlier this week, did the call to ministry feel like you were the one who approached Jesus as in verse 57 or more like Jesus was the one who approached you, like the second guy, in verse 59?

To which I had to say: Yes.

The first full-time ministry role I had was as a missionary in the Dominican Republic, primarily responsible for teaching

**English to a church-run school's first through 12th graders,
along with Vanessa.**

**And I was as eager as the first guy to approach Jesus
along the road.**

**And I was as naïve as the first guy to approach Jesus
along the road.**

Because I thought following Jesus into a medium-to-long-term mission abroad was like he was going to roll out the red carpet for us and make the winding paths straight and the rough roads smooth. I guess I kind of forgot that that's what John called the people to do and not what God promised to do on our behalf. I figured there were no mountains to low or valleys to fill ... we were going to the Caribbean, not a war-torn jungle.

I had this romanticized notion of what life would be like. Now I'm not foolish enough to think everyone lived in grass huts along the beach ... I expected they'd be more of a wind-

and sand-beaten rustic wood variety. We were going to live about a half mile from the Caribbean Sea and I was sure we'd enjoy colorful walks amid fragrant breezes from our modest little home down to the beach.

As for the school, it wasn't run by the Catholic church but I figured that style of schooling would be what kids new. When my parents' generation spoke of Catholic schooling experiences, I was glad I didn't have to have them but I assumed such a discipline system would already have the kids behaving in an orderly fashion.

But a funny thing happened on the way from the Las Americas airport terminal to the Los Tres Ojos neighborhood on the east side of Santo Domingo. I saw that ... there was virtually zero wood-frame construction. Most everything was built of concrete, even tombs in cemeteries. I had the color scheme down, though. Pastels of varying shades ... pink, blue, yellow, green. The route hugged the coastline but there

wasn't a beach in sight. The neighborhoods were separated from the Malecón, a kind of stone-built embankment with a significant dropoff that ran for miles. We were in a city of more than 2 million people but as soon as you left the highway, the roads were dirt.

We had a week or two to get settled – we did have somewhere to lay our heads but it was in the guest bedroom of our pastor's house because our own house wouldn't be ready for a few more months. And when the school year started ... well, our students were not the kind to sit at their desks, hands neatly folded, ready to learn and face the crack of the ruler from the Dominican teachers who shadowed us. Our fellow faculty came and went from the classroom and our often poverty-stricken kids showed up with all the same problems poverty-stricken students in inner-city schools do stateside. Absent parents, drug and alcohol-fueled neglect

and violence, missed meals, insufficient sleep ... not all of them, of course, but plenty.

Just weeks into the school year, we found ourselves both in tears, pleading with God, “why? Why are we here when we are so woefully unprepared for this? Did we misunderstand you because the call seemed so obvious and clear?”

Fast-forward two and a half years and we had completed our 8-and-a-half month school year in Santo Domingo, returned to the Sierra foothills of California’s Gold Country and I went back to my old reporting job for the little 5-days-a-week newspaper, with circulation just a couple thousand more than the Leader and a few thousand less than the PDN. I’d survived the ministry life but I wouldn’t say I’d thrived. And I thought I was done with much more than taking 17-month-old Liana to Sunday services, and going on an occasional short-term mission trip, like the ones we took

back to Santo Domingo to help build an add-on to the school and one where Liana got to come and meet our former congregation and students or the one we took to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to help re-build after a hurricane.

But again, Jesus said, “Follow me.”

Faith Lutheran Church in Murphys, California, supported us in our last visit to the Dominican Republic with our daughter in tow and Pastor Doug asked that I share about the trip in place of the sermon when he was away the following Sunday.

Then it just so happened he and I were the only ones who showed up for the men’s breakfast at Murphys Hotel midweek and so it gave him the chance to ask me a question he said the Holy Spirit had been guiding him to for a while. Have you ever considered pastoral ministry?

Now I’m grateful I had no father to bury at that point (and so is my dad, for that matter). But I did try to put off God’s

call and take my time. It took the better part of a year til I decided to say out loud around Christmas time, “I’m gonna go to seminary.” It took two more months, the bliss of the birth of another child and a loved one sneakily catching me in that dopamine-induced daze to actually submit the application.

The second time around, yes, I was more like the second man who was approached by Jesus, *not* somebody who went looking for trouble -- I mean looking for him.

But I was granted a lot more leeway than that fellow, for sure. Some resistance and objection to God’s call shows up throughout the Bible. Moses had a lot of questions, concerns and especially his feelings of inadequacy I can relate to. Jonah ran and swam as far as he could in the opposite direction. They both came around to God’s call in the end. If either of these unnamed strangers Jesus came across ever did, we don’t know.

We might assume from no follow-up to this story that they didn't. But at the same time, there were dozens and sometimes hundreds who followed Jesus during his ministry and many more who joined after his journey to Jerusalem was completed with his death and resurrection. Most remain nameless and always will. Because following God's call, not just to become ordained, but as a priesthood of all believers, is for God's glory, not our own.

But a little affirmation and encouragement along the way always helps. Even and especially when it doesn't seem to be going well at all. The first time we broke down in tears feeling ineffective and downright lost would not be the last. But before we left, we had the chance to eavesdrop from our living room window, in our own house at that point and hear our 7-year-old neighbor talking to some neighborhood kids who didn't go to our school. And he was gesturing toward our house and explaining to them in Spanish that we were

from the United States and didn't speak Spanish (I mean I did, a little, so I could understand him but he might not have known that). But he told them if they met us how to say "Hello, how are you?" and "Nice to meet you" and a few more phrases, having no idea I was listening to him teach his own little lesson from what he had been taught, the whole time. I finally shed some tears of joy rather than frustration or disappointment.

And finally, in that instant, it finally made sense to follow Jesus, wherever the Lord may go.

Amen.