

Sermon – Luke 9:51-62
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“Fit for the Kingdom”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of the One who calls, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

1. As you may know, I enjoy running. Well, enjoy is the wrong word. For that matter, running is the wrong word. What I really do is occasionally suffer through a pathetic regimen of jogging at its most plodding. It was with shame that I recently worked out with the Grace Lutheran track team, watching the students finish each sprint well ahead of me. I did fine on the first 200 meter sprint, but by the last one I was lame in every sense of the word, barely finishing the sprint while the young men already lounged comfortably from their exertions. So why do I run? Sometimes people ask me that, and I have an answer both simple and true: “So that my pants continue to fit.” It really is that simple. I’m too cheap to buy new pants, so I’d better keep fitting in to the ones I have.
2. It seems to me that we spend a lot of time making sure that things fit, and that goes for more than fitness or clothing. We look for the right fit for schools for our children, or a job that fits our needs or lifestyle. We worry about fitting in; we worry about fitting one more thing into our already crammed schedules. Yes, fit matters, and the primary lens through which we look at these issues is ourselves. Does this outfit, this school, this job, this neighborhood, this activity fit me? Can I fit it into my life on my terms? If not, we’re likely to do without whatever it is – if we’re able to make that choice.

3. And because we look at life this way, we tend to look at God this way. We live in an era of church shopping, as it were. Brand loyalty is a thing of the past. Does the music fit my taste, the theology my preferences, the service times my needs? To a point, that's all well and good when it comes to looking for a church, but not when it comes to how we think about God. For we worship a God who refuses to fit it our lives, and flat out declines to exist and act on our terms.

4. Our reading from Luke's Gospel today is replete with this refusal of God to fit into our lives on our terms, particularly this God revealed and incarnate in and through Jesus Christ. We see this in his interactions, both with his disciples and those who would seek to follow him. It begins with the refusal of the Samaritans to welcome Jesus. At least, I suppose one could say, they were being honest enough to reject him outright. And why the rejection? Because his face was set toward Jerusalem. They could, perhaps, already discern his purpose, which was to go and endure the suffering and death for which he came. Or perhaps it was simpler. Perhaps they simply bristled at Jesus, this Jewish rabbi who still saw the centrality of Jerusalem to the people of God, contrary to the practice of their Samaritan cousins. But it is after the rejection of Jesus by the Samaritans that things get interesting. James and John, these disciples given the apt nickname, "the sons of thunder," want Jesus to act on *their* terms, in *their* ways, in the ways of *this* world. Jesus has been rejected? Well, they think, the response is obvious, if disproportionate: Jesus should let them call down the very fires of heaven to consume the Samaritans! The seeming nonchalance with which his disciples make this suggestion is telling. Sure, we'll follow you Jesus! Just don't make us give up our violent ways; let's do some holy smiting of our enemies. Jesus, however, is having none of it. He won't fit into this world's violent ways, its too easy machinations of revenge, of death and destruction. No, his face is set toward Jerusalem, toward undoing the violence and death of this world by taking it unto his own person, shamed and suffering on the cross.

5. After rebuking James and John, three people in the crowd following Jesus learn what it will mean to really follow him. The first pipes up voluntarily, perhaps responding joyfully to Jesus' refusal to mete out death and punishment. You'd think Jesus would be thrilled – a thirteenth disciple! But Jesus instead tells him the truth of what it means to follow Jesus, and it won't be a stroll through Millennium Park on a lovely day in June; it will involve the active forsaking of this world's comforts, for this is what discipleship demands. More to the point, following Jesus isn't something we sign up for on a lark. We can't choose Jesus. He chooses us. So Jesus calls out to another: "Follow me." The man seems willing enough but, you see, his father just died. He has to go and bury him first. Seems fair enough, but not to Jesus. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, "Under no circumstances is anything permitted to come between Jesus and the one called, even that which is the greatest and holiest, even the law." No, Jesus tells the man and us, to follow Jesus means to follow him first and always, not when you can fit him into your iPhone calendar, no matter how important your to-do list may be. Finally, Jesus calls to a third. Again, he seems willing to follow, but let's slip a "but let me first." Let me first do this, Jesus, or that, or the other, and then I'll follow you. But that won't do. Again, Jesus refuses to fit into this man's life on terms of the man's own choosing. Jesus' face is set toward Jerusalem, and only those called, only those who respond by setting their faces toward Jesus' death and resurrection will become his followers.

6. Abraham Lincoln is said to have quipped, "I walk slowly, but I never walk backwards." These are good words for us who would follow Jesus, for we still have a lot in common with James and John. We gnash our teeth about the decline of the church in our country, about the refusal of others to claim Jesus as Lord. And too often the church responds in anger and righteous fury, seeking to degrade others and build ourselves up. We bemoan the violence in our world and then turn around and seek to fix it with more violence. Jesus

rebukes us. After all, a church that looks and acts as the world does has little to offer. Our focus is not to be on how others are failing to follow Jesus; instead, we are called to look to Jesus and follow in his way, the way that leads not to comfort but to the cross. And really, isn't it this message, the message of Jesus, with which we just might reach those who don't yet know Jesus, not for the sake of our predilections and preferences but for the sake of his gospel? I am grateful for the youth who are traveling with our Slovakia Mission Team this summer, abandoning their own schedules to share the light of Jesus Christ with others. May they inspire bold discipleship in us!

7. We are called to focus on our following, our discipleship, and this focus is to be the central focus of our lives. We can't fit Jesus in on our terms, as if he is just one more box to check off our list. No, Jesus wants it all. Not, finally, because he is a demanding Lord or a stern taskmaster, but because he loves us enough to want all of each of us. Frankly, we just won't have it. We just won't have him. Our lives are not simply too busy, they are too consumed with self-idolatry, our need to put ourselves first and go from there. So Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, knowing what it will take to grab hold of us once and for all. He needs to die for us, that we may die to sin and death in him and rise to a truly new newness of life. No longer do we look to the ways of this world, its violence and self-centered priorities, but to Jesus, whose Spirit lives in us, stirring up the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is, as St. Paul so blithely puts it, no law against such things. No, for these are the gifts that emerge when we let ourselves sink into the love of God that claims us in all aspects of our lives, for our own salvation and for the mission of God in the world. We just can't fit Jesus into our lives, no matter how hard we try. He's not, after all, a pair of pants. But he is the Lord of a new kingdom, with more than enough room for us to fit in with all the people of God. By grace and grace alone you are his. Set your face in joyful faith, and follow him wherever

he leads, all the way through sin and death into the Spirit-filled joy of new life.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.