

Text: Luke 9:51-62

Are you busy? I once asked that at the beginning of a sermon at another church and everyone laughed. I know I am. I always am. And...I'm tired. Maybe you are too? It has been an exhausting couple of years. But Americans are also really good at being busy – we say we're busy like it's a badge of honor in the US. Think about when you ask people what they've been to, you rarely hear, "Oh, nothing much – I'm just taking it slow and resting a lot." Unless they're on vacation or in the middle of the COVID lockdown, people usually rattle off a whole host of things as though our worth relied on our activity level. Culturally we feel the need to be busy and even our children are busy. Maybe that was one of the positives of the pandemic – is that some people stopped all their activities for a while. But I think we have picked up where we left off and I wonder if we could still reflect on what we learned during this pandemic that we might want to carry with us a little longer. Children and teens often have extremely demanding schedules – between sports and extracurricular activities, we've been warned here in the US by psychologists and educators that children are too busy and this is impacting their health and emotional wellbeing. Just as isolation and no activity is unhealthy, so it being overly busy. So how do we find a balance? What would it look like for us as Christians?

This concern about us being too busy came into sharp focus for me when I was the Youth and Young Adult Minister for a parish in Seattle. I had a big youth group of Senior High youth – with 30 kids in regular attendance. But the middle schoolers didn't have a youth group and just met for Sunday School on Sunday morning. I thought it would be great to create a separate youth group meeting one evening a week for the middle schoolers in hopes of growing that group, like our highschoolers. So, the Rector told me to call a meeting with all the parents to get their input first. I had very high expectations that the parents would be thrilled to know that I wanted to expand the ministry opportunities at church for their children. I invited over 20 families to come, so you might

imagine my shock when only three parents showed up, all three of whom came for the sole purpose of asking me not to create a youth group for their kids. The reason, they said, was that they could not possibly add one more thing to their schedules, that their kids were already full of daily activities and it was almost impossible for them to balance it all as it was. One mom said, if she had to drive her son to one more thing or felt pressured to bring him to one more activity every week, she just couldn't handle it. The other parents nodded in agreement. Needless to say, we never started that youth group for the middle schoolers. But I reflected on that experience for many months, and still today wonder how we got to this point. Something is amiss.

And I believe our Gospel reading today has something to tell us and teach us about this – about our busyness and our priorities. It seems like a text written for our time and culture. Jesus often uses hyperbole to get his point across and this text is no exception. In it, we find Jesus encountering two different individuals, both of whom claim to want to "follow Jesus wherever he goes." But Jesus knows that words are easy, and actions are much more difficult. Many of us may say, "God, Church, my faith are my first priority." However, our actions often reveal something quite different, and our schedules and activities will always reveal where our true priorities lie. In this Gospel text, it sounds as if these followers have legitimate reasons for wanting to put off following Jesus a little longer. One says they must first go and bury their father. Sounds reasonable on face value, but what he is really asking for her is more likely that he had money coming to him and wanted to wait until his father died in order to claim his inheritance. In other words, "Jesus, I will totally follow you...after I get all my affairs in order and get my physical reward from my aging father." But Jesus sees into our hearts and responds with "let the dead bury their own dead" to that excuse. Jesus is equating the spiritually dead with the physically dead here. And the fact is, we can always find an excuse, a reason, even sometimes seemingly very good reasons, for putting off the

call to follow Jesus fully and completely right now. The second would-be disciple says, "I will follow you" (notice the future tense here) and then says, "but first let me say farewell to the people at my home." Jesus' response sounds particularly difficult, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Jesus won't accept that excuse either – seeing into our hearts Jesus knows this statement is indicative, not of simply wanting to say goodbye – but of half-hearted disciple, a stalling tactic, an excuse to put off the more radical call we undertake when we agree to follow Jesus. I imagine Jesus hears these excuses the way I hear my kid's excuses when I tell them it's time for bed. "But mom, I just need to finish this one of part of my game" or "But mom, I just need to finish this part of the show" or "But mom, I haven't had my dessert yet." I know that this "one thing" will simply lead to the "one more thing" and bedtime could get postponed indefinitely if I indulge it.

But we all do this in some way with God. We may actually believe all our reasons for not following Jesus seriously right now, for not making the time to become true disciples today. We excuse ourselves from not being serious disciples and followers of Jesus today, because, well, we're so busy with so many other important things. I find myself telling God at times that I'll have wait until my kids are older or until I'm retired or until I finish this project before I'll be able to find the time to drop everything and engage more fully in prayer, or in giving, or genuine and radical mission for Christ.

The text invites us to ask the questions about how we spend our time: Is following Jesus on the path or deep discipleship, a top priority in our lives in word and deed? Do our schedules, our spending habits, and our actions show that following Jesus is really at the top of our list? Jesus wants us, as hearers of his words, to be shaken by these statements because we are all so easily content to re-arrange our lives around everything but the call to seriously follow Jesus today. I believe Jesus hears all of our very "legitimate" excuses about why we are not making the Kingdom of God our

top priority and still insists and says to us, "Never mind that. Follow me now, today, anyway."

This is not a call to burn out and work-aholism- we actually need to stop our obsession with being too busy. Certainly, the whole point Jesus is making is that some things need to be dropped and even left undone, including things we might think are essential. Think again, Jesus says. What is really essential in your, our lives in light of eternity? What needs to happen in order for us to keep God at the forefront of our lives, schedules, and actions. It requires sacrifice to truly follow Jesus. What would it require of us, for instance, to actually follow the command to observe the Sabbath, to observe a whole entire day of rest with God at the center of it, to use that day to build deeper relationships with our family and with God, to actually let go of all the "important" things that so demand our attention for one day a week, or even one hour a day?

As Christians, we're called to be counter-cultural- to be okay with leaving some things "undone" in order to make sure the most important things get done – to make the decision to arrange our lives around following Jesus and the call on our hearts - not just as a promise for the future, but today, right now, right here. Not next year, not next month, not next week, not tomorrow - now. Because today is the day of salvation and Jesus says, "Don't look back – don't make excuses – let that stuff go – and come follow me." Amen.