

NOTHING AND EVERYTHING

Luke 9:51-62

Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after Pentecost comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 9, verses 51 through 62. In this gospel lesson, Jesus speaks some rather difficult words. But if we trust him, and take his words to heart, we will experience his peace and joy. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 9, beginning at verse 51, we read in Jesus' name.

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ And they went on to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸ And 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." ⁵⁹ To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." ⁶⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹ Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home."

⁶² Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ,

Your Lord, Jesus Christ, requires nothing of you. And, yet, at the same time, he requires everything of you. This is the paradox of the Christian life. Salvation is free. Forgiveness is free. Grace is free. That's literally what the word "grace" means. It's free. There is nothing you must do, and there is nothing you can do, to earn God's favor or become his child. It's free. Your Lord, Jesus Christ, paid the entire cost with his holy and precious blood.

This is the great and central truth of the Christian faith. And we must hold this firmly and faithfully if we wish to be saved. To depart from this truth would be to abandon freedom, forgiveness, and life, and to return to slavery, condemnation, and death. Your Lord Jesus Christ requires nothing of you. There are no "buts" about this, and there is no catch.

And, yet, there is a paradox here. On the one hand, your Lord Jesus Christ requires nothing of you, and on the other hand he requires everything of you. This sounds like a contradiction, but it's not. It's a paradox. And here's the difference between a contradiction and a paradox: The Law of Non-contradiction says that a thing cannot be both true and not true at the same time and in the same way. So a contradiction is not really possible. It can only exist in the mind, but not in

reality. A paradox is different. A paradox is something that might seem to be a contradiction, but there is some difference, usually in the way that the two statements are true. And the Christian faith is filled with paradoxes.

Here are a few examples: The doctrine of the Trinity is a paradox. We worship one God, and that one God is three persons. The doctrine of Jesus Christ is a paradox. He is both God and man at the same time. And he's not part God and part man, but he is fully God and fully man. The nature of a Christian is also a paradox. We are sinners and saints at the same time. We are, at once, completely sinful according to our sinful nature, and completely righteous according to the new nature in Christ Jesus. These are all paradoxes. And the Christian life is also a paradox. Your Lord, Jesus Christ, requires nothing of you. And, yet, at the same time, he requires everything of you.

So how can this be true? The key is in the word "Lord." Two of the three men Jesus encounters call him "Lord." And the one who doesn't call him "Lord," at least implies the concept when he says, "I will follow you wherever you go" (9:57). The second man, after Jesus says, "Follow me," says, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father" (9:59). And the third one says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home" (9:61). So all three of them either call Jesus "Lord" or treat him as their Lord. We should notice, by the way, in fairness to the first guy, that he doesn't show the same hesitancy as the second two. All we have is Jesus' warning to him that he needs to count the cost. Maybe he decided to turn back, but we don't know.

So what is a lord? This isn't a word we use very often these days, because we don't really have lords in our society, or we at least don't call them that. But here's my definition, and I should state that this is really just my own working definition. I don't know how Daniel Webster defined it, but I would define it this way: a lord is a benevolent ruler. A benevolent ruler ... He uses his power to care for his subjects. This is what we mean when we call Jesus our Lord. He is the supreme authority in all the universe, and he uses his supreme authority for our good. And, since he is the supreme authority, we are also subject to his will. We are bound to obey his commandments. We are bound to follow him wherever he leads us. And this is good for us.

This is a frightening thing, because we do not know where he will lead us. He may lead us away from earthly riches. He may lead us away from our homes and careers. Following him may even lead us away from those we love. And I do not mean that God's will is that we should be estranged from the families he has placed us in. Leaving your family might be a violation of the Fourth Commandment and, if you are married, also the Sixth Commandment.

But that's the stumbling block for many with this text. Jesus seems kind of cold when he says to the one guy, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead" (9:60). And when the third guy says, "Let me first say farewell to those at my home" (9:61), Jesus says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (9:62). These seem like simple, pious requests. Attending your father's funeral and telling your family where you're going are both good works. We should do those things. But that's not what Jesus is attacking. Jesus sees that, for both of these men, their families had become gods to them.

They both placed following Jesus after their family relationships, and this is idolatry. Their families are first for them, and they both say as much. "Let me *first* go and bury my father." "Let me *first* say farewell to those at my home." For both of these men, their vows to Jesus were a contradiction. They both call Jesus "Lord," but then they both say something else is "first."

That's a contradiction. It's not even a paradox. It's a flat-out contradiction. If Jesus is Lord, he is first, and nothing else can be first.

Following Jesus Christ means that everything is under his lordship. Our desires are subject to Christ. Our goals are subject to Christ. Even our own ideas of what is right and wrong are subject to Christ. This is one of the hardest parts. Both of these men had their own ideas of what is right and wrong. And they might have been right, but that was really Jesus' call to make. Do we trust Jesus to tell us what is right? If the answer is "no," we're only following him in so far as we want to, which really means that we're not following him at all. It's really a matter of faith. Do we trust Jesus? Do we trust that the path he leads us on is the right path? Do we trust that his commandments are good, even the ones we have not yet learned, and even the ones that don't make sense to us?

Both of these men tried to retain control over their paths. And that was the problem. Instead, they should have said, "I will follow you, Lord." Period. And then you see what Jesus says. Maybe Jesus says, "Hey, isn't your father's funeral this afternoon? You should go to that." Or, "You should tell your mom where you're going." Maybe that's what Jesus would have told them to do, or maybe Jesus had something more important for them to do. But they did not trust that whatever Jesus commanded of them, is truly best.

We do this too, emphasis on the word "we." Someone asked me once if I ever preach about sins that I struggle with. I laughed and said, "If I didn't I wouldn't have much to say." Here's what we do with the doctrines and commandments of God: we retain veto power. You know what I mean? We're kind of afraid to submit to whatever our Lord says before he says it, or at least before we learn that he said it. Or we're cool with most of it, but there are a few things we don't really like. So we kind of hold onto this right that we can really be the judges of what we will believe and what we will do. That's what I mean by "veto power." So think about this with me: Let's say that you're reading your Bible tomorrow morning, and you read something you don't really like. What do you do? Do you ignore it? Do you say, "That can't actually mean what it says"? Do you say, "That can't be right, because that's not what I believe"? That's what I mean by "veto power." But here's the thing: if Jesus is Lord, there is no veto power. We don't get to veto the Word of God! If Jesus is Lord, then I am not. Whatever Jesus says, is right, and whatever Jesus commands, is good, even if we do not understand, and even if we do not agree.

Think about this. No two people ever agree on everything, members of the Holy Trinity excluded. They always agree with one another. That's because they're always right. But for everyone else, we are going to disagree on something. That's because we can be wrong, and we often are wrong. So when you stumble upon something where you and God disagree, who's right? We, of course, think we're right. That's the nature of having an opinion. So it's really hard, in the moment, to step back from that. So think about this in the abstract before you get to those things where you actually disagree with God. Who's going to be right? You? Or God? We have to think about this, because there will be times when our ideas come into conflict with God's Word. I guarantee it. It's going to happen. So what will you do? Who is truly Lord?

If Jesus is Lord, then we trust that what he says, is true. And we trust that what he commands, is good. This is part of what I mean when I say that Jesus requires everything of you. He is your Lord. He owns you. You don't have the right to say "no."

So let's go back to this word "lord." Jesus became our Lord by purchasing us out of slavery. The Small Catechism describes this really well. It says,

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I believe that Jesus Christ ... is my Lord; who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, bought me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death; in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

How did Jesus become your Lord? He purchased you. He bought you. That's what the word "redeem" means. So he owns you. And this good. It is good to be owned by Jesus. He freed you from sin, death, and the power of the devil. But you are not ultimately free. You are not autonomous. You are free from the evil power that once held you. And now you belong to Christ. He is your Lord.

As your Lord, Jesus requires nothing of you, and he requires everything of you. He requires nothing of you to become his subject. We enter into his kingdom by a gift of grace. He purchased us. He paid the price "with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death." And now that we live in his kingdom by grace, we are under his lordship. But even this is a good thing. It's not some kind of bait and switch where Jesus lets you in for free, but then there's a high renewal cost. In those bait and switch deals, the company gives you a good deal upfront, but then they make a big profit off you later. Jesus does not bring you into his kingdom to make a profit off you. He brings you into his kingdom because it's good for you. Everything he does is good for you. His commandments are good for you. Even when he tells us to leave everything and follow him, that is because it is good for us. The "everything" that he calls us to leave behind is filled with false gods that will draw our love away from Christ and lead us back into slavery to sin, death, and the power of the devil. Jesus mercifully desires to spare us from that. He is a benevolent ruler every step of the way.

In this way, being in the Kingdom of God is like being in a family. And I mean a good family, the kind where parents love, protect, and provide for their children. I know that not every child has such a family. That's a tragedy. But every child should have such a family, and we pray that God would grant it. But here's what I mean by comparing the Kingdom of God to a family: Children do nothing to become a part of the family. They are either born into it, or they are adopted into it. Children do not have to earn their way in. Children do not have to earn the love of their parents. It's a pure gift. But parents also require things of their children. And this is also good for the children. I'm not talking about parents forcing their children to serve their wishes, like, "Go do my laundry, son." I'm talking about the commands parents give that are good for their children or their siblings. Every night, all around the world, parents force their children to go to bed. And this is good for them. They tell their children to brush their teeth, eat their vegetables, stop hitting their sisters, and do their homework. Even when parents command them to mow the lawn, they're teaching them responsibility. A perfect parent, if there were such a thing, would give many commands to their children, and every one of them would be good for the children. That's what I mean when I say that being in the Kingdom of God is like being in a family. But it's actually the other way around. Being in a family is like being in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is the big reality, and the earthly family is a dim reflection of it. A good family gives us a glimpse into the joy of being in God's family.

Jesus requires nothing from you. That is, he doesn't need anything from you. And he won't accept payment from you. He purchased you. You paid nothing. He brought you into his kingdom by his own death and resurrection. This is what it means at the beginning of this Gospel lesson where Luke says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" (9:51). Jerusalem was the

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place of sacrifice. The cross was waiting for Jesus there. And that's why Jesus set his face to Jerusalem. He went there to pay it all. He requires nothing of you.

But he also requires everything of you. He commands you to trust him in all things. He commands us to trust that he knows what is best for us. He knows even better than we do. Is that true? Yeah. The one who set his face toward Jerusalem and paid the ultimate price for us is not going to hurt us. He is not going to lead us wrongly. He commands us to trust him in all things, because he is the only one worthy of our trust. As an act of pure grace, he commands nothing of us and everything of us at the same time. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.