

A New Way

Luke 9:51-62

Farmville Baptist Church

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Have you ever been in an argument? I'd imagine all of us have. Certainly, if you are married, or ever have been married, I am virtually sure that you have had at least one disagreement or argument. You can't live with someone in close quarters without ever having a difference of opinion. I knew one older couple in a previous church that swore up and down they had never had a fight or a disagreement or a cross word – but I was around them enough that I know that was, at best, a bit of self-delusion! Conflict, from the extremely insignificant to the overwhelmingly important, is

part of any human relationship, because you are seeing two distinct individuals coexist.

I still remember the first argument Cadance and I had after we were married. In general, we are not a couple that squabbles much, but from time to time one of us, usually me, will rub the other the wrong way, or we'll have a legitimate difference of opinion, and we have to hash that out. The first time we realized this was about 3 days after we returned from our honeymoon. I was working full-time as a pastor, and she was working full-time as a probation officer, and when we both got home from work we decided to make dinner together.

And that was the night that I found out there were different ways to make green beans.

You see, by this point, we had both lived on our own for several years, and we were used to doing things our own way, including fixing supper. And while I made my green beans one way, she made them another – and I’ve got to tell you, how to make green beans never comes up in the premarital counselling material! So it was over something pretty unimportant that we had our first married fight, which gives us a chuckle today.

But aren’t we all like that? We have ways of doing things that we’ve always done. Maybe we learned it from our parents, maybe it was the norm in our generation at school, maybe we’ve had a long habit. A certain understanding of how to treat waiters and waitresses, for example, or what customs to observe for a funeral, or how soon to tell our kids about adult matters, or even how to cook a can of green

beans, those are things we take for granted as “just the way things are”...until we encounter or even enter into relationship with someone who understands those things differently. And when that happens, we have to wrestle with what we used to think or do or how we saw the world, and what the other person used to think or do or how they saw the world, and figure out how to move forward on a new path, together.

You may not quite realize it, but that’s what our Scripture passage today is about.

Jesus, the disciples, and all the people they met along the way lived in a particular culture in a particular time and place, and they were used to particular ways of living and acting and being together. Perhaps no passage quite captures this reality more than our text this morning. It

begins as Jesus turns towards Jerusalem. Up to this point, much of his ministry has been in Galilee – but now is the time to head towards Jerusalem for his final, world-changing mission. And to get there, he and his disciples go through Samaria.

A couple of weeks ago, I mentioned that I love maps – and if you have your Bible with you today, turn to the maps in the back. If you're joining us online, take a moment and Google a map of Palestine or Israel in the time of Jesus. On that map, whether in your Bible or on the computer, you'll see Galilee in the north and Judea, where Jerusalem is, in the south – but in-between, stretching from the Jordan River all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, is a region called Samaria. To go from Galilee to Jerusalem without taking a ship on the sea or crossing the river into Gentile territory

means you have to go through Samaria. It isn't far, just a day or two's journey in some places, and Jesus and all of his disciples had probably made that journey before.

But that doesn't mean they wanted to go there again.

You see, there was, quite literally in the parlance of the time, bad blood between the Samaritans and the Jews. Long before, when the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by Assyria, the poor remnant of Jews in the region eventually intermarried with colonists from Babylon and beyond. The resulting new ethnic group that emerged practiced the Jewish faith of the region, but as Judaism developed around the Temple in Jerusalem and in synagogues throughout the Babylonian and Roman empires, the descendants of the Jews in Samaria followed a different path.

By the time of Jesus, the rift between the Jews of Galilee and Judea and the Samaritans was fairly wide and bitter; neither group saw the other as legitimate covenant partners with God. A first-century form of racism combined with religious elitism to create a culture among Galilean Jews and Jews of Judea that saw Samaritans as untrustworthy, dangerous, and second-class citizens in the community of faith, if they were even legitimately part of the community of faith at all. It would have been entirely normal within the culture of James, John, and the rest to look on Samaritans with skeptical antagonism, and any perceived slight would warrant a reaction of anger and desire to punish the offending villagers or teach them a lesson. This would be true even if that village's past interactions with Jewish travelers made them understandably antagonistic and

inhospitable in the first place. That was the culturally-accepted thing to do, part of the way of life of first-century Palestine, and it bred a cycle of spiraling hurt and hatred that fed back into itself, keeping the painful reactions going.

But the way of Jesus isn't the way of the culture that said Samaritans were all bad and deserved to suffer from excessive force for every little slight or rejection. Jesus was teaching a new way. And in the new way of Jesus, revenge and retribution weren't the order of the day. Neither was defending the Master's honor, treating the Samaritans as second-class citizens or somehow less human than the "good Jewish boys" the disciples were. There was to be no calling down fire from heaven for the disciples in any circumstance, and certainly not for the mere rudeness of one Samaritan village – a rudeness perhaps well-earned through hard

experience of bigoted travelers just like James and John. No, Jesus was living out what he had instructed his disciples just a few days or weeks earlier, back at the start of Luke 9, when he sent them out on mission. Look for who can provide you hospitality, but if folks won't do that, don't try to force them or punish them. Just move along to the next village, which is just what Jesus did in verse 56, but only after making sure his huffy disciples understood that such an angry, self-centered response wasn't what he was all about, even if it was endorsed by the culture they had grown up in. He was going a new way.

Jesus and his disciples continue on from that Samaritan village, resuming the journey towards Jerusalem. And as they go, they come across other people on the road, people who want to join him on the way. But in the conversations

that follow, they reveal that they understand his new way no more than James and John did when they wanted to rain fire down on some rude Samaritans.

First, there's a man who wants to follow Jesus wherever he goes – but Jesus isn't sure he really means it. This was a time and place when almost everyone – the vast majority of people – rarely went more than a day's journey from home. Sure, they might make some pilgrimages to Jerusalem, and the very few who were part of the merchant class might travel to a seaport or even to a place like Ephesus or Rome in the course of their vocation, but the vast majority of people were subsistence farmers. I've never been a farmer, but I've known a few. If you farm for your living, for your career, it's a whole-life job. I don't know many farmers that take many vacations, and especially during growing season, the

opportunity to get away from the farm for a few days is slim to none. And that's in the modern world, with automation and vehicles and such. In the ancient world, farmers had to be home at night, every night, so they could get up the next day to care for the livestock and do the thousand tasks that each day on the farm demands. And almost everyone was a farmer! The first-century Jew – indeed, the first-century person of any nationality or religion, and almost any income level – was by definition a homebody, rooted to the soil in a particular place.

But that wasn't Jesus' way. To follow Jesus meant embracing the fact that, as the old Gospel hymn suggests, "this world is not my home, I'm just a-passin' through." And while we interpret that to mean that someday, when we die, we will go on to heaven, Jesus would have meant it to have a

little more immediate effect than that. His way didn't put home and hearth first. Sure, some people may well be called by God to put down roots and build a homestead and work the land for generations – we need people like that, after all. But Jesus invited his disciples, all of his disciples, to a mindset – and that mindset meant that they would have to be ready to walk away from all of that if it's what God desired. Jesus' new way was not bound to a place; God might just open the door and call you to hit the road, and Jesus expected a follower of his to recognize that call and embrace it. That was different than the way of the world in which he lived, but it was the way of the world he was and is bringing about.

The second conversation we find Jesus having on the road was with another passerby. In this case, it seems Jesus

saw something in the man, something of kingdom importance. “Follow me,” he invited the man, apparently unprompted. It was the invitation to join Jesus on his new way, to become part of his kingdom work. But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” That seems somewhat reasonable; after all, our culture tells us that we have a responsibility to our families, especially our parents, and that was true then as well. Jesus’ reply can sound harsh: “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” While the teachings of Judaism promoted honoring parents, as do many philosophies and religions and societies, in Jesus’ new way, there is something more important: answering the call of one’s heavenly Father, following the invitation to join God at work in the world.

This is reinforced in the third conversation Jesus has on the road. Perhaps overhearing Jesus' words to the other man, this fellow traveler says, "Jesus, I want to follow you – but let me tell my family goodbye first." Again, that probably strikes you as a reasonable request. It strikes me that way, too! But that, too, is because our culture – just like the culture of Jesus and his followers – prioritized family relationships over everything else. To leave on an adventure, even an adventure for God, without the family knowing and affirming that call would be unthinkable.

Unless you're Jesus. Jesus sees the man's call to serve God now, and that vital mission is more important than anything else. That's astounding. The work is too urgent, too time-sensitive, to allow for a trip home. Jesus is asking a lot here – he's asking the third man, and indeed, all three of the

potential followers, to go against every ingrained part of their culture, every priority they had developed with long habit, every reasonable demand on their time that could have mitigated the radical call of God on them.

Fred Craddock, one of the most effective preachers in America in the past century, cuts to the point: “The radicality of Jesus’ words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family.”¹ Wow. I’m going to say that last sentence one more time. “Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family.” That sentence flies right in the face of our culture, and really of almost every culture, because most of society is constructed on the building block

¹ Craddock, 144.

of the family. But Jesus was going in a new way, and his new way included a new family. Indeed, when his very own mother and brothers came to check on him, because they heard he was doing some pretty radical stuff, he refused to meet with them. Instead, he said, the people around him – his followers, those who were serving the kingdom of God beside of him – *they* were his mother and sisters and brothers. That didn't mean Jesus hated his family or didn't care for them; he would famously make provision for his mother even as he suffered on the cross. But it did mean that Jesus now had a new family, a new set of priorities, a new, radical way of life.

And that's a problem for us, because most of us aren't radicals. Oh, we may get passionate about an issue or two, and we may have a couple of buttons that will trigger a

reaction from us if they are pushed, but most of us are pretty normal, pretty in-step with the culture around us. We love our moms and dads, our brothers and sisters, our spouses and children, and we center our lives around them. We may have some family squabbles, even over things as mundane as how to cook canned green beans, but we really aren't going to knock our family off the pedestal we've placed them on. And we're probably not going to go running off into the blue after some spontaneous reaction to God's call, like the first many Jesus encountered on the road, and we're probably not going to closely examine our inherited and subconsciously embraced prejudices, either, any more than James and John did. We aren't radical like that.

But Jesus invites us to be.

Or maybe another way to put it, as author Michael Frost did in a recent book on the new way Jesus taught, is that we should keep Christianity weird. There, he appeals to a word that we use for a particular kind of radical person, one that we could apply to some of the pioneers of Christian faith stretching all the way back to Jesus: eccentric. People who seem a bit out of step with their culture and community because, and this is key, something else drives them. The center of their world is different than everyone else, and it makes them see the world differently. And that is appropriate – because the word “eccentric” comes from the Greek word “ek-,” meaning “out of,” and “kentron,” which means “center.” Eccentrics are people who are out of center, skewed somehow away from the norm because something else is at the center of their lives or their perspective on the

world. The word gained widespread use to describe these folks during the late Middle Ages when astronomers like Copernicus began to argue that the Earth wasn't the center of the universe, but that the Sun was the center of the Solar System and the Earth revolved around *it*. Copernicus became the original eccentric.

Would anyone consider you or me to be eccentric? Would they look at our lives and know what was at the center, what our lives revolve around? Would they see the evidence of our lives – not just what we say, but the things we do, the priorities on our calendars, the positions we hold, the topics we avoid, the causes we embrace, the relationships we cultivate – could anyone look at those and find any difference in those of our nice, non-Christian neighbors? Are our lives reflective of the normative Southern middle-class

white American culture in which most if not all of us reside?
Or is something else at the center, drawing us into a new
orbit, a new path, a new way?

On the back dust jacket of his book, Michael Frost includes the phrase, “Jesus is different. Go and do likewise.” We easily see the first part of that tagline on very evident display in our Scripture passage today – Jesus is different. I think all of us would readily agree with that statement. But it’s the second part that give us trouble – just like it did for James and John in Samaria, just like it did for the three men Jesus met along the road. Jesus didn’t want to just be different. He wanted those who followed him to go and do likewise. He wants *us* to go and do likewise. Jesus came and blazed a new way in the world, a different way. The question

is the same for us as it was for each of those he encountered:

will we follow him on that new way?

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