

“Wood Bees and Round Tuits”
Luke 9:51-62
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Jesus Christ was neither an advocate of so-called “family values,” nor a critic of traditional family structures, though various camps in the church have tried to claim him for their side. Rather, he was, I believe, on the side of health of mind, body, and spirit, an advocate for the reign of God, and a critic of lame excuses. At first glance, tonight’s passage helps fuel the debate that Jesus denied the value of family, this passage being one among several in which Jesus seems to suggest that family is at best a distraction to discipleship, and at worst, a means for the devil or systems of injustice to interfere. As it happens, in this particular passage, Jesus both affirms and critiques the idea of family, all the while staying true to his core message of proclaiming God’s purposes and challenging people to live into the grace he not only represents but embodies. Jesus is not easily pigeon-holed. Neither should we be.

Those verses in which Jesus challenges three unnamed, but potential, disciples at the point of their commitment to the kingdom should be challenging for us too. Hopefully, they make us question the depth of our willingness to follow no matter the sacrifices needed. We may not all be called to martyrdom, or even the sacrifice of family, but we are likely to be asked to make some decisions along the way and these types of stories are good rehearsal material. But to get the most

out of those confrontational verses, it is helpful to put them in conversation with the rest of the passage, especially the famous verse 51, famous, at least, among scholars of Luke as the “turning point” of the story, the end of the first chapter or the beginning of the second. We are told that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem,” meaning that the conclusion to the story is drawing near. From here, it is all downhill towards Jerusalem, no pun intended. Taking a route that is chosen more theologically-minded than geographically-determined, Jesus steadily marches on toward his rendezvous with destiny, or rather destiny’s rendezvous with him. Verse 51 is the sign that there is no turning back, and the teachings we just heard are meant to reinforce in those who later heard the story, that Jesus meant business, that more than just a great teacher, he was someone who was faithful to God’s call, all the way to the end of the story. Those who would hear this story then, would get the message that they too must be in it for the long haul, just as we who hear it today get the message that we too must be in it for the long haul.

The version of the Bible I use has some handy little titles subdividing the story. The one for this passage is “Would-be followers of Jesus,” and so since they are unnamed, we’ll just call them the “wood bees,” for short, wood bees as distinct, of course, from wannabes. For those of you who have never come across these terms, let me explain. To say that someone is a “would-be follower” means that it is very possible for them to actually follow. Though they possess the capability, they lack what it takes to get over the hump. A wood bee is a person who has not

fulfilled their potential for one or more reasons. They are underachievers.

Wannabes, on the other hand, are those with the unquestioned desire to participate in something but who simply do not have what it takes. The difference is illustrated by the example of my dream to join in a few years' time, what they call the Champions Tour in golf, which is a nice way to say the over-fifty, over the hill set of golfers who just can't compete with the young guns on the regular tour. I am not a "wood bee" Champion's Tour golfer. I am, I am coming to understand, a golfing wannabe, full of desire but stymied by inability. The church is, it seems, stuck with me for the duration.

Now, the kind people who placed the section heading in my Bible that reads "Would-be followers of Jesus" were probably not thinking about this distinction, but it is an important one, since none of us are wannabe followers. We all have the ability, the potential, the capacity. It is not a foolish waste of time to try to follow Christ, like it is for me to pursue my dream of golfing glory. The question is not one of ability but of motivation and desire. All you have to do is take a step! And thus, the lesson is directed to all of us, and helpfully for us, Jesus challenges these wood bee disciples at a stumbling point almost all of us share as we try to go from being wood bees to has-beens, which is to say, as we try to be successful at whatever God has given us the ability to do. That point is, of course, our emotional maturity, and more specifically, our ability to navigate our way through the complex relationships that shape us, and propel us or hold us back.

As Jesus talks with these three wood bees, he is, I believe, addressing them at the level of their relationships, suggesting how hard it can be sometimes to navigate that narrow and treacherous stretch of water that runs between the divine and the daily, between those significant relationships of family and friends with all their demands offered up face to face, and the most significant relationship and all of God's demands offered up in the Spirit. Straying too close to one side or the other presents a very real risk of running one's emotional ship aground. Despite what seems, in this passage and others, like a careless disregard for those important relationships, Jesus was no stranger to God's design at creation, a significant feature of which was human relationships. We were created to exist not only with God, but with each other; "It is not good that the man should be alone," God says looking down on the garden of Eden. And so we exist in what is hopefully a creative tension between family ties and ultimate concerns, trying to keep from cutting ourselves off from either source of life while trying to embrace as fully as we can the benefits of both. And in these interactions with the three wood bee followers, Jesus is giving us some helpful wisdom for the journey down that turbulent river.

The first would-be disciple seems to be erring on the side of abandoning too quickly his links to family and community: "I will follow you wherever you go," he says, implying that he has nothing to hold him back, not even, it would seem, relationships of enough value to give him pause. Here is a would-be disciple

wishing to follow Christ mainly because he has no reason not to. His availability speaks to a lack of love and grace in his life, an emptiness he hopes to fill with Jesus. (The same thing happens these days, when people are *suddenly* available to do all kinds of things for the church.) But Jesus responds wisely, offering the reminder that he has not come to be a substitute for all our emotional voids; the foxes in their holes and the birds in their nests are exactly where they should be. Life as a disciple of Jesus without a home is not going to be a life any different from what the would be disciple already already lives. The invitation to discipleship is an invitation to growth and change; this one is just running away and seeking more of the same. He will soon be disappointed.

The other two would-be disciples tend to the other extreme. Rather than running away, these are having trouble extricating themselves from the demands of the relationships they have. These two are too tied up in their responsibility or their need for affirmation or their feeling for others to be able to grow and change in their journey with Jesus. Were they to leave without fulfilling the obligations and expectations others had for them, or that they had for themselves, their regret would keep them from being able to do as Jesus might ask of them or their need would keep them from assuming the posture of a disciple. You see, it was not really a matter of taking care of this one last thing, this burial, or this farewell; responsibility addicts can't quit cold turkey any easier than crack addicts; love junkies will always need a fix. The demands of the road to Jerusalem would

quickly present a crisis to these two and they would soon be on their way back to that safe, if stagnant, place from which they had come.

Jesus is speaking, I think, to that common and natural human experience of tending to that which is the most immediate, or is causing us the most anxiety or emotional discomfort, even if it is not the most enduring, or the most healthy. True, in the context of this story, the wood bee disciples have the immediacy of Jesus in the flesh, and not simply the Spirit's nudge to remind them of God's call, but even with that face to face encounter, their boats are heading towards the rocks on one side or the other. Those primary relationships that give us identity and value and love, and sometimes heartache and nightmares and emotional pain, are not relationships that are easy to relegate to a position of secondary importance, no matter how great the payoff, in terms of abundant and eternal life. Nor are they relationships that we can avoid having altogether, relying on other outlets, even divine ones, to carry the emotional freight in our lives. Indeed, God has given us both needs, for God and for community, and calls us to a balance in tending to each.

But more than that, Jesus' wisdom suggests that the seeking of that balance leads to healthier relationships that make the following of Jesus more fruitful, authentic, and rewarding. There's a reason why Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar

and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.” It is because the state of our relationships with others affects our relationship with God and the state of our relationship with God affects our relationships with others. In the case of these wood bee followers, Jesus has challenged them at this very point; the present state of their relationships has not left them free to accompany him all the way to Jerusalem. They need to do a little more work to be prepared. Some might make it only as far as the next town before Jesus disappoints them, others a few miles further before their anxiety peels them away from the group and leads them home again. These wood bees do not have, at that moment, the emotional maturity for such a strenuous journey. But here’s what’s really interesting: none of the disciples, not Peter, nor John, nor Andrew, really had it when it counted. They all fled the garden in Gethsemane in fear for their lives. Only Christ saw it through to the end, to the cross. Not only the wood bees, but even the actual disciples were, in the end, exposed as wannabes.

The cold, hard truth that none of us are really better than wannabes should not dishearten us, but rather help us to accept the grace we need to follow at all. You see, the hyperbole Jesus is employing here, like he did about the camel passing through the eye of a needle, or the plucking out of our eyes if they cause us to sin, the absurdity of the hyperbole -- “let the dead bury the dead” -- shows us that following is not really dependent on how prepared we are, how clean we get before setting foot inside the church, how much repenting we’ve done before we

are acceptable. The good news of the gospel is that being a wannabe actually is good enough, but only as long as we get around to it. The first step on the path to following Jesus Christ is recognizing that no one is more worthy than anyone else, but that Christ calls us all to take a first step in faith. The first step may be away from those relationships that keep us tethered, or the first step may be toward the relationships we've been avoiding, but either way, that first step will be towards God.

Making those kinds of changes is the hardest work we'll ever do, whether we are at the beginning of that work or have been at it for many years. But living into a deeper discipleship demands that we invest the time in all of our relationships, making them as healthy and appropriate as we can, so that we are ever freer to offer ever more of ourselves to Christ's service. Our story tonight suggests that none of these wood bees was ever going to get around to it, around to making the kind of changes God gives us the strength to make, if we accept the help. *They* may never have gotten around to it, but that doesn't mean that we can't. In fact, I have some round tuits for each of us, round tuits that we can offer up to God as a prayer of confession as we prepare to come to the table, little pledges, if you will, to listen to Christ's wake up call to us just as he offered it to those three wood bees. As we are fed by grace in the sacrament, may it strengthen us to follow through on those commitments and be the kind of disciples who can truly accompany Christ on the journey to Jerusalem. Amen.