

Luke 9:57-62  
2 Corinthians 9:6-9  
November 7, 2010

### Don't Look Back

In his 1985 hit song *The Boys of Summer*, Don Henley sings the words, "A Little voice in my head said don't look back you can never look back. I thought I knew what love was. What did I know? Those days are gone forever. I should just let them go." *The Boys of Summer* is a song about a relationship that has ended. The writer is left behind and is having trouble moving on. Sometimes its hard to look back.

I don't know a whole lot about Don Henley; whether he spent a lot of time reading the Gospel of Luke or any time at all. But Jesus says in Luke, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God; a very clear rejoinder to never look back.

The context is discipleship. Someone has come up to Jesus and said "I will Follow you Lord," but first I need to say goodbye to my family. Jesus shuts him down. Three people encounter Jesus. They accept his invitation to follow; yet Jesus is not all that encouraging. To the first one he says " The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Those who choose to follow in his path may well find

that things change so much, life becomes so different that they become disoriented. Christian values and service are not always culturally popular. Following Christ may put you at odds with the people around you. To the second person who wants to bury his father he says, let the dead bury the dead. Your priorities are out of whack. To the third one he says don't even say goodbye, never look back.

In some ways these three quips seem rather uncharacteristic of Jesus. Picklepuss prophet pops off on his pupils. Some scholars even question whether these ripping reprimands are actual excerpts or whether Luke edited the story. Maybe it is not an exact quote, but in any case this little paragraph makes an important point about discipleship. Jesus' response to legitimate requests to postpone the journey of discipleship reminds Christians in every generation that there are always justifiable excuses to defer the decision, to stay uninvolved and unresolved. There are always important matters which compete for our attention and it is quite easy to put off the claims of discipleship. In fact we can spend our whole lives making excuses for not doing the right thing. The road to stagnation is paved

by good intentions. Never do today what you can put off until tomorrow – that's the motto of the procrastinators club.

About twelve years ago a member of our church stopped attending worship. We noticed that she had absented herself and I made a couple of phone calls to see what was up. The woman was very honest with me. In your sermon of a few weeks back you defined couch potato Christians. I just don't have the energy to be involved with Ark and Dove. I want to go to a church where I can sneak in the door just before the service begins and beat a hasty exit. I want to be in a church where nobody expects me to do anything.

About six years ago a couple who had been attending our church sent me an e-mail and thanked me for Ark and Dove and all the nice people. They said they liked our church but they were going to transfer to a larger church. They wanted to go to a church that had more programs and they wanted to go to a church that didn't expect them to run or lead any of the ministries.

A little more recently I met with a couple and the husband complained about my sermons. They decided to go to another church. He told me I don't want to be told when I come to church, that I am expected to do something. To me that is not what faith is

about. I want a church that makes me feel good. I want a sermon that makes me happy. He thought our church was a little too activist. I had to admit to him that very often I do ask people to do things. "You got me there," I said. and out the door they went.

I always get a little discouraged when people leave the church; but I really didn't have much I could say to these five former members. I guess we shouldn't look back. We have always expected our members to be regular attendees at worship and to participate in the life of the congregation. It's not something I made up on my own; (this is not a country club), it's an agreement we have reached as a congregation. It's an ideal we have held up as a community since our beginning. Over the past 6 years or so we have described these values using the Six Marks of Discipleship as our guide for members.

The Six Marks of Discipleship: 1 We expect our members to be regular worshippers, 2 to read the Bible, 3 to pray daily, 4 to continue their Christian education through classes and or small groups, 5 to be generous stewards and 6 to engage in acts of mission mercy and justice both inside and outside of congregational life. There are always seasons of stress, moments of crises and times of personal

need that effect our ability to live up to these ideals; but these six Marks are our goals, our direction, our collective covenant with one another. We goof up, we fall short, we skip over, we totally forget, we get unfocused; but we don't look back. We keep our hearts focused on following Jesus who is in front of us.

Around this time of the year our church always takes the time to look at the 5<sup>th</sup> mark of discipleship Generous Stewardship. Years ago we used to spend a lot of time talking about the church budget and justifying our every penny. What we learned from stewardship experts and each other is that really people don't get all hot and happy about numbers and finances. Basically if we all thought the Session of the church was populated by financial dunces and ecclesial crooks; not only would we not give, we would not be in worship. Really what we have taught each other as a congregation is that stewardship and discipleship are synonymous. People who are generous with their time, people who are generous with their financial resources and people who are generous with their talents and know how, are in fact faithful disciples. The Good Life is about Letting God Lead and sharing generously because most of us in this church have way more than enough.

The phrase **More Than Enough**, which is our Stewardship theme this year, comes from the passage we read from 2 Corinthians this morning. If you were listening intently or studying the screen you will likely have noticed that the words “more than enough” actually were not shared. On most Sundays we read from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible which is a very very careful scholarly translation of the Hebrew and Greek scriptures. Presbyterians like to be careful. And so the sentence reads “And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” Yet there are other translations of the Bible, perhaps less exact, that are easier to read, for instance The Message and the CEV or Contemporary English Version. And in the CEV the sentence reads <sup>8</sup>God can bless you with everything you need, and you will always have more than enough to do all kinds of good things for others.

The scripture passages this morning are in some ways a little hard to hear. First we have Jesus knocking would be followers on the noggin, shouting don't look back, never look and then we have Paul telling us we all have more than enough. Reality is we often look

back, offer excuses and eat sour grapes, and reality is some of us don't have more than enough.

Jesus and Paul can at times both be pretty tough; but I don't think either one of them is being stone hard literal. They are trying to get us to think. They are trying to pull us out of our ruts and our worn out thinking. Given half a chance it seems that most people will grab the opportunity to make excuses for not getting control of their lives. I don't have more than enough and I don't have time to follow Jesus. What I do have is some well established patterns of behavior with which I have become very comfortable and I don't want to change. And this is where we get all sweaty and annoyed because Jesus is all about change. Jesus is always pushing us to be better people working for a more just society. Jesus is always pushing us to be faithful. Jesus is always pushing us to make better decisions. Jesus is always pushing us to be more generous and he wants us to be happy about it too. The way Paul puts it is That God loves a cheerful giver. Not only does God want us to be faithful and generous, God wants us to be happy about it. I have this image of a Germanic parent telling their child, you will eat your spinach and you will like it

too. You will increase your pledge and you will like it too. Taste it, its good for you.

The craziest things have happened to me on the way to writing stewardship and discipleship sermons. Yup people have quit the church. They did not like their church spinach. They have made that clear. They are dining at other church pot lucks. But in many instances where the truth is stranger than fiction, people have confided in me that they really like stewardship and discipleship spinach. They have tried out generosity and they are not looking back. They are happy about the acts of mission mercy and justice in which they are engaged and they are at peace about being generous stewards. Apparently Paul was not blowing smoke in our church faces when he brags about the virtues of a cheerful giver. They do exist and they are dangerous because their attitudes are contagious and if you don't steadfastly try to stay in your rut, these do-gooders might knock you off balance and pull you out.

In fact sometimes bible translators are too careful – maybe they don't want to rock the boat. If you take the Greek literally – it is not true that the Lord loves a cheerful giver. It is far more accurate to say that the Lord loves a hilarious giver. That's the Greek word *hilarion*.

Hilarious givers are worse than cheerful givers because hilarious givers have the power to change the world. Hilarious givers also meet up with strong resistance. The world does not always welcome change. Oh the little stuff is fine but don't upset the order. Jesus too hilarious met his resistance on the cross. The Son of Man all hilarious with generosity had no place to lay his head. Born in barn, dead on a cross; No wonder the Beatles called him the fool on the hill. No wonder people quit the church, this discipleship stuff is a lot like Spinach.

Our Stewardship Team and our Session has a couple of Hilarious thoughts for you:

Pledge Cards have already been mailed – our Sister Church Harundale Presbyterian Church gets about 95% of their pledge cards turned in on Dedication Sunday. We are not looking back at our past record; but we have this hilarious notion that we could do as well as Harundale next Sunday. In fact over half of our elders and Deacons have already turned in their pledge cards.

Our Ministries need about \$75,000 more to truly accomplish effective and faithful ministry. Since \$75,000 is probably about ½ of one percent of total household income in this church, and most of us

have not yet achieved the tithe, we have this hilarious notion that we could achieve this goal. I think its pretty fair to say that a \$75,000 increase wouldn't get us a Cadillac church but we might actually be driving in a fully insured basic mini van.

About 90% of our teams have team leaders but about 90% of our teams could use one or two more people to help undertake ministry. We have this hilarious notion that we could call out another 50 members to step up and follow. The collective effort of 50 more could really transform ministry around her.

Don't look back, never look back, maybe I shouldn't show this chart but often church experts says that worship attendance is a great indicator of church health. We have our dips and plateaus in 18 years, but in general we have our faces pointed in the right direction. Jesus has called us to follow, he is honest that it is not always easy. He is honest about true discipleship being disorienting. He is honest that the world may laugh hilariously in our face. Yet with a world upside logic he shows us that true discipleship is both life changing and contagious