

It Only Takes a Moment

(Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62)

Sermon delivered by Matt Rhodes at St. George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia

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In the name of the God who creates, the Son who redeems, and the Holy Spirit that sustains.
Amen.

In my “previous life” prior to entering seminary, especially when I was a press secretary on Capitol Hill, one of the most challenging things I ever had to do was write speeches. Let me rephrase that: one of the most challenging things I ever had to do was write *short* speeches. This was a particular struggle when I had the chance to help craft something on a topic for which I had a *ton* of material sitting in front of me. Speechwriting was always a good exercise in working to figure out which one of the nine opening stories I had on hand would draw the biggest laughs, which 10 points should be focused on to the exclusion of the other 90, and how to be succinct and clear in the message. Often, tough choices had to be made. At the end of the day, though, I can say – for better or worse – that I got quite good at producing amazing 20-minute speeches for 10-minute blocks of time.

Today's readings have given us just such a wealth of material to consider. These are two of countless places in the Bible that hit the mother lode of amazing stories and key points that would make any speechwriter giddy. Before you panic, though, let me put your minds at ease; this will not be another instance of saying, “Why talk for 10 minutes when 20 will do!”

In today's Gospel, we are allowed to be witnesses to moments when Jesus interacts with three strangers and discusses the possibility of accompanying him on his journey to Jerusalem. And here, we see people being faced with some tough choices. Two of them freely asked to go with him, while Jesus approached a third and offered what was essentially a very simple invitation, “Follow me.” Now he *could* have picked anyone else; he certainly could have walked by these three without acknowledging any of them.

But he didn't.

For these folks, the opportunity to walk with Christ – either as a result of an offer they made or an invitation they received – wasn't something they could do without first wrapping up other business. One had to mourn and tend to the burial of his father. Another wanted to take time to say goodbye to friends and family before setting off. For both, what they felt was necessary to accomplish at that moment was in fact just a distraction from a role they were being invited to play on a much larger stage.

What they were feeling here, in these moments with Jesus, were the “demands of discipleship” – not simply a one-and-done moment of saying “Yes!”, but something that required a lifetime of conversion, of saying “Yes!” to God over and over again. They had determination – they

wouldn't have entertained the possibility of life of discipleship if they hadn't – but their determination only went so far.

To paraphrase Galatians, Jesus was calling them to a life of freedom, to travel with him as he proclaimed God's message on the way to his final destination. But they did something that's common to many of those he encountered during his ministry: they focused on their own immediate needs instead of the needs of the wider world. From what we read, they really wanted to go, but as the short-sighted people they were – the very type of person for whom Jesus seems to have a particularly affinity – they squandered these moments of divine invitation and much greater, divine possibilities on what was right in front of them. One was told the life he would lead would not be one of comfort. Another wanted to honor his father. The third – to borrow a popular phrase – flip-flopped, wanting to go but not wanting to *let* go.

It's like a child who has been invited by their parents to go to the playground; I *really* want to go, they say, but I *have* to finish watching my cartoon first. Or perhaps it's the recent Nationwide television commercial that I'm sure many of you have seen. A husband and wife go crazy with washing the pets, fixing the car, cutting the hedges – anything and everything but addressing the need to plan for their retirement. They know they really *should* talk about their savings, but suddenly the chores are far more important.

Why was it so easy for someone like Peter – a brash, outspoken, sometimes undisciplined man who caused a lot of headaches for Jesus during their time together – to drop his nets immediately and follow Christ, while it was so much harder for the people Jesus encounters in today's Gospel reading? Why could Matthew so easily get up from the counting table that was his life and livelihood and set off immediately without even knowing where he was going, while one of those here can't depart without a full round of goodbyes? What was it that caused Mary Magdelene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and countless other women to cast everything else aside and, when others fled, unquestioningly follow Jesus not only to the cross but to the garden tomb on that Easter morning?

The initial calls of discipleship that we receive from God – the nudges intended to gently lead us in a new direction – may be easy to ignore. But those things we are called *to* may be so difficult and overwhelming that the mere thought of change may cause us to freeze up. In my own journey I've had such a moment – the time when I discerned that everything God had been trying to tell me and which I had been trying so hard to ignore was leading me in the direction of seminary and living into a new vocation as a priest. What would this mean – and how would we survive? Yes, it meant drastic changes for my family and many things to which we would have to adapt. But as I learned – and as I'm reminded time and again – God just doesn't call and then leave you to it. Just as Jesus called the 12 and then walked with them, and just as he would have walked with those he called in today's lesson, he calls us ... and then *joins* us.

We're not called to be bound by the things that can distract us from our true purpose.

We are called to freedom.

What if I had responded to God the ways these two responded to Jesus? What if I had said, "You know, God, you're right. Just let me wrap up all of these other projects and then I'll get right

back to you.” Take it from me – that’s not always a great answer. One thing I believe is this: doing something we are called to do is always better than doing something to avoid the call.

Very often, that call to freedom – the call to follow Jesus – is a difficult one. As with these three individuals, we’re often not quite ready to take up the cross the way Jesus did for us. In this Gospel, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem; he has accepted the next steps of his journey and is prepared to take them. His disciples didn’t quite get it – in fact, they didn’t get a lot of things when he first told them. He tried to explain to them what was about to happen, but they didn’t understand. Here, he’s trying to bring others along – and they don’t understand, either.

They didn’t understand their call, and often we don’t see what we’re being called to. But do you know what? We are still loved. Like the disciples, there are times when we, too, don’t quite get it – and at the end of the day, that doesn’t really matter. Jesus still wants us to walk with him, and he waits for us to catch up – to follow the paths to which we’ve been led, to dare to do something new, to take the first step towards something that we possibly can’t even comprehend.

Answering that call means things will be left undone – and that’s okay; we can’t do everything, and God doesn’t expect us to try. Like the messengers mentioned in Luke, Jesus wants us to run on ahead of him – to invite the people we meet to run ahead with us – to spread his message of love, hope, and acceptance – to be able to turn and point as he approaches and say, “Jesus invited me to come with him – and here I am.”

That message of hope and invitation that you can share is simple and succinct – and it won’t take a 20-minute speech to say it.

Just a moment will do.

Amen.