June 29, 2025 Rev. Mike Eller

Subversive Questions: The Upside-Down Way of Jesus

Following Jesus?

Luke 9:51-62

"Aslan is on the move," the beaver tells Peter, Edmond, Susan, and Lucy in C.S. Lewis's beloved story *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe.* This news marked a turning point. Narnia had been under the oppression of the evil witch; and knowing that Aslan, the great lion, was *on the move* was hopeful news. Each of the main characters, not yet knowing much about Aslan, reacted in their own way. Edmond felt a "mysterious horror." Peter suddenly felt "brave and adventurous." Susan felt as if some wonderful smell or strain of music had just floated by. And Lucy had that feeling of waking up in the morning, knowing it's the beginning of Summer.

In a similar way, our text this morning from the Gospel of Luke tells us that *Jesus is on the move*. This begins a lengthy traveling narrative, taking up nearly one-third of the entire book, much longer than what is found in the other gospels. Jesus is making true on his instructions to the disciples to bear witness to the "euangelion"—the *good news*—in Galilee, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, which encompassed all the Gentile world.

A Jesus on the move is a risky Jesus. There's no telling into what dark corners of the known world he will ask his friends to follow. From what we know, the disciples were present and attending, and probably had strong feelings of their own: Some likely felt brave. Some perhaps filled with terror. Some maybe downright angry. The calling to follow the mobile Jesus provokes us all in different ways.

Our text this morning marks a turning point. It says that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." This was Jesus showing a determination, a resolve, in his mission which he knows will end with a cross. Scholars agree that there really is no coherence to this path that leads to Jerusalem. Of all things, it makes little *geographical* sense. With the meanderings through some 10 odd chapters, Luke here is making a *theological* journey more than anything else.

If Jerusalem was the missional goal—if the cross is the standard for a life of faith—then what are its theological parameters? Who is in and who is out? Who is centered and who are left on the margins? On this mission, to where are we following Jesus?

The Jewish Rabbi has his sights on Jerusalem, so a stop in Samaria makes the least bit of sense. Jews and Samaritans were like the Jets and the Sharks, the Capulets and Montagues, Shia and Sunni Muslims, perhaps you and your next door neighbor or coworker. Given their complex history—centuries of political hostility toward one another over cultural and religious differences—these two groups avoided each other at all cost.

Samaria was the region situated between Galilee in the north and Judea in the south. Jews headed in either direction would opt to take the longer route around and through the Transjordan rather than setting foot in Samaria. Jewish women didn't marry Samaritans. To Jews, Samaritans were heretics, half-breeds, worshipers of a deity but on the wrong mountain—they chose Mt. Gerazim over Jerusalem.

It doesn't take much to hear the implications for us: Isn't it that we too have those in our lives that we go out of our way to avoid, or ignore… those groups for whom we take the long way around to try and circumvent? What are our Samarias that stand between where we are… and going the way of Jesus, the way of the cross?

Many are inconvenienced by a Jesus on the move. Just wait until next week. This brief encounter with the unclean Samaritans is just the beginning to Jesus's mission to show preferential treatment to those on the margins. In the story of the Good Samaritan and others, he doesn't just tolerate the despised but centers them, showing us that the way to salvation moves through such as these. That message is made all-the-more profound when we consider how in today's brief encounter with the Samaritans, they immediately reject Jesus and crew. For any number of reasons—not the least of which, their Jewishness—they turn them away.

Some speculate that the Samaritans are already aware of Jesus and know the political mess into which he is headed and want no part of it. And when James and John saw the Samaritans reject Jesus, living into their nickname as the "Sons of Thunder", they asked if they could send down fire from heaven to consume them. They obviously missed the whole point of the trip. But to their credit, eliminating others who oppose you *had been* the way. This threat

to rain down fire harkens back to the story of Elijah in 1 and 2 Kings, who in a dramatic showdown on Mount Carmel, challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest to prove which god is real. Elijah prays and a pillar of fire consumes the sacrifice and Elijah wins the day. Victory *over* opponents had been the way.

Jesus immediately rebukes James and John, and they leave town. How often we think we are the ones?! How often we too want to call down fire on those who resist us with a righteous rage?! Instead, the fire of the Spirit burns to melt our pride, our violence.

I grew up in a church mentality of religious superiority. This is none other than the traumatic leftovers that is a history dripping with religious conquest. Any whiff of this still infecting religious spaces today will continue turning people away from the doors of the church, and grieve the heart of God.

We are currently in a sermon series I am calling: "Subversive Questions: Learning to Live in the Upside-down world of Jesus". Today's question isn't one that Jesus asks in words but is implied in the narrative itself. What does it mean to *truly* follow Jesus, today? I believe that *learning* to live in Jesus' upside-down world must include an *unlearning*. There are assumptions, and prejudices, logic and societal customs that we have to undo if we are going to be transformational Christ-followers.

Today, I'd like to name one barrier—and there are many—which has led to the continued decline of church membership and the rise of religious skepticism in our time. This is over the notion of mutuality. Churches, I find, are great at mission trips, seasonal charities, and the occasional time in soup kitchens. I don't want to downplay the importance of immersing ourselves in practices such as these. These continue to shape the person I am today. Yet as we attend to acts of service, real transformation happens when we move to a place of mutuality.

Last week, I shared about Father Gregory Boyle, who practices priestly proximity as the head of Homeboy Industries in LA. This is the ministry which gives jobs to present or former gang members. I talked about how he invests time in the streets getting to know these individuals and the cool encounter he had with one, named Cricket, when Father Boyle called him by his real name, William.

In a recent interview, Boyle said something really provocative. He said: "Service is the hallway that gets you to the ballroom, where there is the

exclusive mutuality of joy, kinship. God doesn't want anything from us. God just wants us to be in that ballroom. When it stops at service, there's a barrier—the service providers and the service recipients. But truth be told all of us are in need of healing. It is one of those things that join us together as a human family." I love that image and metaphor of the ballroom… and the contrast it gives to service as simply hanging out in the hallway. One is the dance of mutual transformation and the other is merely the space just outside the dance room door.

And if I can nuance this a little more, it's really a difference in the prepositions we are embodying—*to* or *with*. Service *to* the needy still maintains the hierarchy. There's the one receiving the service and the one doing it. The one in need and the one with the answer to that need. The relationship is clearly defined. Kinship *with* those on the margins is how we *all* find our shared humanity. The relationship is mutual because we no longer know who's doing the service and who stands in need. The way of Jesus is a compassion that moves beyond service. As a cis-, white man literally standing on a platform, I realize that I have perhaps a greater distance to make up in embodying this upside-down way.

Can you think of a time when you were engaged in service to the other and you felt as if you benefited just as much *if not more* than the other? That feeling is moving into the ballroom.

I love the story Father Boyle tells of the time actress Diane Keaton visits one of his work places, Homegirl cafe. "Diane asks what the waitress, a former gang member, would recommend and the waitress responds with three things she likes. Then she says, 'I think we have met somewhere. I think I know you.' And Diane says, 'Oh, I have a face that people just think they recognize.' Then the waitress says, 'No, I've got it. We were in prison together!' "Here's an Oscar-winning actress and a waitress with an attitude," Boyle says. Yet, these were just two humans sharing a moment of mutual benefit. This is what kinship looks like.

The world of music-making with others—particularly in religious spaces—had been my vocational home for many years. Music, I find, provides a common language which helps to overcome barriers like cultural difference, spoken language, even religious difference. In learning how to make music with others, one particular image and model that has challenged me is the approach of Ethnomusicologists. If you're not too familiar with what these people do: an Ethnomusicologist is a person who studies music-making in its

cultural context to discover how music shapes societies and cultural identity. I've held to this model of learning over and against the method of colonizers who entered other cultures not to understand them but to take them over, to have *them* adopt *their* way, even *their* musical traditions. Ethnomusicologists engage another culture from a posture of learning and never to coerce or change anything. Even though, often they are culturally on the side of privilege. From my own research on this over the years, I find that the fieldwork they engage in becomes the common spaces where the worker and the subject first bond over a shared identity as human beings. From their own testimonies, the ethnomusicologist, while documenting the process, actually becomes part of it. Mutuality, of course, is inherent in the process of music-making. The worker and subject relationship becomes flattened in these spaces. And when this happens, there is opportunity for mutual transformation. I think this is a helpful model for the church and us as disciples.

We often complicate discipleship don't we? Churches invest a beaucoup amount of money in trainings on evangelism, church growth, and apologetics… to try and *win over* the world. There was a time when I guess that really seemed to work. But welcome and hospitality always came with a caveat: As long as the other comes over to my side. Radical Compassion carries no caveats.

The OT prophet Micah simplifies it for us (Micah 6:6-8):

"God has told you, mortals, what is good…
What else does God ask of you
But to live justly and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with God?"

May all our programming and methods be in service to this list: To let justice-making define your life, to be a person of kindness, and to live from a place of humility, from the posture of a learner. When we do this, we are truly followers of the way. This was true *then* as it still is true today.

Dear friends, we are being asked to dance with others, not *just* serve them. Allow yourself to be swept away. This may be a simple ASK, but it is a journey that takes a lifetime to get good at. We have to practice each and every day until the dance feels natural. THIS is what Jesus means when he calls: "Will you come and follow me?" Let's dance. Amen.