

Sermon: An Inconvenient Truth
Text: Luke 9:51-62
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Context: WWPC
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Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead . . ."

Luke 9:60a

In 1962, Karl Barth made his one and only visit to the United States. On that visit he was asked to summarize his vast theological project. Boil everything he wrote down to just a few sentences.

It was a surprising question to ask someone of Barth's stature. If you don't already know this, Karl Barth is widely considered to be the foremost Protestant theologian of the 20th century.

That's not just my opinion. The editors of Time magazine evidently shared this view, for they put him on the cover of their magazine right around the time of Barth's visit to America.

His collected works would fill roughly the same space on your bookshelf as the Encyclopedia Britannica.

And they rival that venerable collection in scope, with one principle difference: the entries in Barth's collection would likely describe concepts most of us might not immediately understand, mainly because they are explained with words we're not familiar with.

Which is why his answer to that question was even more surprising than the question itself.

Barth had written what literally must have been a million words in service of his main project, in service of illuminating what it meant for the Word to become flesh and dwell among us, and what the implications of that Divine event were in the modern world.

So he took a moment to consider how to distill this enormous volume of work into just a sentence or two. And then he replied: *Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*

Another great Christian thinker, C.S. Lewis, took a different approach to explicating the essence of the Christian faith.

Rather than producing dense, heavy tomes of deep theological reflection, as Karl Barth did, Lewis went in the opposite direction. In slim, bestselling volumes like *Mere Christianity* and *The Screwtape Letters*, this brilliant Oxford don tried to render the deep mysteries of the Christian faith in language that made them accessible to the common person.

So he was very different from Karl Barth in that respect. But like Barth, Lewis was once asked a deceptively difficult question about the Christian faith. Did he believe Christianity was hard or easy?

This great thinker, this man who is almost universally believed to be the 20th century's most popular and accessible apologist of the Christian faith, this brilliant yet humble man pondered the question for a moment, and then replied:

Do I think Christianity is hard or easy? Yes. Yes, I do.

And I believe he's right. On one hand, the core of the Christian faith is as simple and lovely as Karl Barth made it seem: Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. And by the way, Jesus loves you too, this I know for the Bible tells me so.

And it's easy to argue that the Christian faith starts with saying yes to this love, starts with simply confessing, believing and accepting that this life-changing affirmation is true and that it applies to you.

But that's just the first step on the journey of Christian faith. The road that follows gets decidedly more complicated.

The hard truth about Christian discipleship is that it comes at a cost. It's not cheap because nothing of value, nothing that endures, ever is.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, another great German theologian, put it this way: When Jesus bids us to follow him, he calls us to come and die.

That is, he calls us to pick up our own cross, and to be willing to die there to our own desires, that God's desires might be born anew inside of us.

You don't hear this sentiment preached in church very often. Mainly because if it was preached on a regular basis -- or even on an occasional basis -- most churches would likely average just a couple of members: a theological zealot with a death wish and a deaf person who cannot hear what the preacher is saying.

So it is tempting to avoid this text altogether. Because whether we like it or not, here in this one scene the very founder of our faith appears to underscore this inconvenient truth: if you do chose to follow him, you'd best be prepared to be broke, homeless, and indifferent to your family. And, yes, maybe in the end to die.

Which leads to a couple of important questions.

If Christianity is as grim and terrible as this passage makes it sound, why would anybody bother? Why would anybody choose the Way of Jesus if that way leads down such a harrowing path?

Those are fair questions. So what then are we to make of this story?

The easy way out is to say that Jesus was quite plainly in a bad mood that day. And that's not such a stretch.

It's impossible to match the spirit and tone of what Jesus says here with the spirit and tone of the man who invited everyone who is weary and heavy laden to come to him and lay their burdens down, so that he might give them rest.

The man who said he didn't come to steal or kill or destroy but to give life, and to give it abundantly.

So it's entirely possible that this episode is a one-off, an aberration, an exception.

He is, after all, headed to the cross himself. And maybe the stress of the conflict that awaits him is weighing him down. He is fully human, let's not forget, and we've all said weird, regrettable things when we're tired and stressed and cranky.

Which is to say, it's entirely possible that this episode is just Jesus the man at his most vulnerable and his most human, a moment when he is most like us.

So that's one possibility.

But what if there was another way to hear these words? What if this is the verbal and theological equivalent of one of those figure/ground images that first appear one way, until your eyes and your focus shift and you begin to see them another way?

Like that famous image that initially appears to be of an old crone. Huge nose, pointed chin, a babushka scarf on her head. She looks like someone who might cast a spell on you.

At first that's all you can see, you're just sure there is no other way to see this image. But you keep staring at it anyway because your friend assures you there is more to the story. There is a whole other way to see what's right in front of you.

Finally, your focus shifts and suddenly you see it. A whole new image comes into view. A beautiful young woman with a dainty nose and long eyelashes, and a jaunty plume springing out from the front of her elaborate hat.

It was right there, right in front of your eyes, the whole time. You just didn't see it at first.

This past Tuesday night, Robyn and Bob and I went to see the Broadway musical Kinky Boots. Fortunately, we did not have to go to New York City to do this.

The live performance was filmed, and now it is being shown in select movie theaters all across the country. So we drove out to the Biltmore Grande and took our seats.

Without giving away any spoilers the story is in part centered on a character named Simon. You see early on that even as a young boy Simon is what we now call gender-fluid.

Which is to say, the features of his outer body do not match how he feels and identifies on the inside. And so Simon begins to act out this difference, dancing around the house in his mother's red high-heels.

His working-class father takes note. He has no interest in having a son he believes he can't be proud of, so he literally tries to beat this poofta non-sense out of his young boy.

But Simon was not born to be his father's son, at least not the son his father wanted and expected him to be. Simon was born to be himself.

In fact, Simon would eventually come to realize he was not really even born to be Simon. He was born to be Lola, fabulous and wonderful in her own right. And to become herself, she had to leave her father and his stifling expectations behind.

I don't believe that Jesus calls us to come and die. Or at least I don't believe he calls us just to come and die.

I believe he calls us to come and live. Yes, to do that we very well may have to die to some things.

To stories that keep us from being and becoming who we are born to be, who we were created to be. Stories told perhaps by our mother or father, or perhaps stories told even by ourselves, about how we're not good enough, that we don't deserve to be loved. Let those stories die.

He calls us not to be homeless but to find our home in the ground of all being, so that we might enjoy the shelter and protection that comes from knowing we are loved by God forever, and nothing will ever change that because this love is rock solid.

He doesn't call us to be broke but to understand that money is a lifeless idol, and that if we chose to devote ourselves to serving it, we will die slow deaths, bit by bit, in small, steady stages.

And so he calls and invites us instead to redefine our understanding of what it means to be wealthy.

He call us to lay our burdens down. He calls us to leave behind lives that might not be working for us, so that we might live lives that are.

To leave behind lives that may feel impoverished for lives marked by abundance.

To leave behind fathers or mothers, or perhaps spouses or partners, who mistreat us or abuse us, so that we might be embraced by our very Creator, a loving God who understands us completely and accepts us unconditionally because this same God made us.

At the peak of his ministry, large crowds followed Jesus everywhere he went. Why did they do that?

They didn't follow him because he made them feel terrible about themselves but because he made them feel like the sons and daughters of royalty, because he made them feel like they were worth something, that they mattered to someone, and that someone happened to be God.

They didn't follow him because he offered them a bleak future in this life, a life of total austerity and hardship, but because he offered them the possibility of living abundant lives, as members of the Commonwealth of God.

It is true that following Jesus can be hard and costly. It cost Dietrich Bonhoeffer his life when he resisted the rise of evil in his country, And it cost Dr. Martin Luther King his life when he resisted the rise of evil in this country. He told the truth about America and America fought back.

But maybe the real message of this story for us here today is not that following Jesus can be costly.

Maybe the real message for us is that not following him can be costly. That is can cost us the chance to become who we are, and to live the beautiful, abundant lives we were meant to live.

Amen.