

Last Christmas a friend who has a Cricut—one of those machines that lets you design your own stickers and t-shirt transfers—made me a bright orange sweatshirt that says *I'm Not For Everyone*. It's sort of a running joke amongst the pastors that if we want to make everyone happy, we should stop working in the church and start selling ice cream at Ritchey's. Now, as we read in today's passage from Galatians, we all have a responsibility to grow more fully into lives of love, patience, generosity, gentleness, and kindness, but that does not necessarily mean that we will be universally appreciated. God has made us with many different personalities, so if we are authentic, we probably will not be everyone's cup of tea. We shouldn't try to push people away, but even Jesus recognized that the life he calls us to isn't for everyone.

Our gospel today starts with a detail that should not be overlooked: Jesus *set his face to go to Jerusalem*. Jesus knew, and Luke knew, and we know what would happen to Jesus in Jerusalem, but in spite of Jesus frequently telling the disciples that he would be betrayed, killed, and raised again, the disciples either don't understand or don't believe that this is true. They carry on acting as though any day Jesus will take over in the manner of a triumphant earthly ruler and their proximity to him will win them their own positions of power. So Jesus continues to attract would-be followers who do not understand the full cost of discipleship; and Jesus suggests that cost is pretty high.

First, someone offers to follow him wherever he goes; Jesus warns him that he is not heading to a safe and secure home but instead has no place to lay his head: the goal of his journey is not a single, known destination, or in other words, his work is never done. One wants to postpone following until he has buried his father; it's unclear whether he meant that the funeral was imminent or that he needed to wait until his aging father no longer needed his help. Either way, Jesus denies the request. Finally, a potential disciple just wants to tell everyone goodbye before he sets out after Jesus; but Jesus tells him, *no one who looks back is fit for the kingdom*. None of these requests seem unreasonable; in fact, some of them seem quite responsible, but Jesus accepts no excuses for postponing discipleship, no matter how good those excuses are.

Jesus obviously isn't opposed to people following him; he isn't even opposed to imperfect people following him, as the twelve original disciples prove over and over again through their many mistakes and misunderstandings. But Jesus does want aspiring followers to understand that Christian discipleship is not easy and, like the Book of Common Prayer says about marriage, *is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly*. After all, when Jesus gets to Jerusalem, they're going to kill him; those who would follow him deserve to know that the stakes are that high.

We might have expected Jesus to do the opposite, to go to great lengths to try to attract and recruit followers; but Jesus' invitation to discipleship is an invitation to love, and love is not coercive. Although it might have been chosen primarily because it mentions a plow and bidding farewell to one's parents, today's reading from 1 Kings is a good illustration of Jesus' perspective on discipleship. Elijah commissions Elisha as his successor by throwing his mantle over Elisha while he's plowing. Elisha asks to do what one of Jesus' potential followers asks to do—say goodbye—before he follows the prophet. Elijah says, *Go back if you want to. I haven't forced you to do anything.* Then Elisha does put his hand to the plow, but only to turn it into firewood to cook the oxen—a dramatic symbol of leaving his old life behind forever in order to fully embrace his new calling. That expectation of total commitment is what Jesus tries to convey to his would-be followers; Jesus offers a whole new way of life, with no space for compromise, yet he does not force anyone to live it.

This is a lesson that Christians have been slow to learn, an example set by Jesus that his followers have been lousy at emulating, beginning with the very first disciples and this very story. A Samaritan village declines to welcome Jesus, and James and John think that's sufficient justification for *them* to ask God to obliterate the village with fire. Jesus rebukes them and simply finds another village. Yet the Christian church has a long, deplorable history of acting like James and John in this story instead of acting like Jesus—all too eager to pray for the destruction of anyone who rejects our interpretation of faith—or even willing to take matters into our own hands—instead of simply letting people be and moving on. If Jesus himself didn't condemn those who chose not to follow, why should we? A more faithful response to Jesus' call is a *self*-assessment of how straight we're plowing the row in front of us rather than looking all around and judging the path of others, which is sure to take us off course.

I want to clarify that following Jesus' call to faithful discipleship does not always mean going out into a literal different place in the world. Recently I was gifted a copy of Episcopal Bishop Marian Edgar Budde's book *How We Learn To Be Brave* in which she proposes that authentic discipleship sometimes requires bravery to go somewhere new; but sometimes it requires bravery to stay and recommit to the hard work of being fully present where we are. Whether we're called to follow by going or by staying, being a disciple of Jesus, who was determined to live as God would have us live, even when that led him to the cross, is not easy and is not compatible with compromise and half measures. Though we're all invited, it's not for everyone: that's why nobody is forcing us to do it. Yet Jesus still calls us to set aside even our best excuses and trust his way. What might we find if we're brave enough to follow?