

Don't Look Back

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*Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
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Text: Luke 9:51-62

Because it's been on everyone's mind, I thought I'd speak to you from the heart about the Supreme Court decision released on Friday overturning *Roe v. Wade*. The first thing I want to say is an apology that in the sixteen years I have been with you, I have not once dealt in a serious way with abortion and reproductive choice from the pulpit or anywhere else, and I'm sorry for that. I can only say that, as I think is the case for many of you, I thought these important questions were settled in law, that our country was always going to hold space for women to make choices about continuing or ending a pregnancy. Also, I know that this issue is one where people have strong feelings, to put it mildly—I'm old enough to remember women's clinics being bombed and doctors being murdered—one of them right outside his church. What's the point in talking about something that gets people angry if it's not going to change? But now it has.

The Presbyterian Church has wrestled with these things over the years, and where we've come down as a denomination is that we trust women. The scriptures don't settle the question of when human life begins or, more precisely, when a developing life becomes equal in moral weight to fully formed human lives. The scriptures certainly don't talk about ectopic pregnancies, where there is no possibility of a baby being safely born, only grave danger to the mother. The scriptures don't talk about what to do when you desperately want a child, but what is growing and developing inside you doesn't have the organs necessary to sustain life. They don't speak to the heartbreaking and unique situations that we know about from our families, from our close friends. So the Presbyterian Church says these are important decisions that no one ought to make casually—and very, very few *do* make them casually—but where laws that dictate one choice are too blunt an instrument, and they're going to do more harm than good. So as a church we're pro-trust, pro-dignity of the people whose lives and families are going to be impacted. In no way are we pro-abortion, but we are emphatically, unapologetically pro-choice.

This position isn't binding on all church members. You don't have to agree with it, to be Presbyterian. I don't have to agree with it, even as a pastor, but I do. When you or your family members wrestle with heartbreaking choices, I want to be able to stand with you, to pray with you, to listen to you—but ultimately I trust you. I trust your heart, guided by prayer and open to God, to make the decision.

I'm a dad, and immensely, joyfully glad to be one, twice over. I was so excited to see the ultrasound pictures, as what started as blinking dots grew into the shape of my children. And I cried happy tears when at last I held them and they took their first breaths. But I've also witnessed the physical trauma of birth twice over. I've seen the burden that two relatively uncomplicated pregnancies brought for my spouse. And while I would wish the blessing of willing parenthood on everyone who's open to it, I can't imagine imposing all those immense costs on those who are too young or in poor

health or victims of sexual violence or otherwise not able to welcome children into their lives.

I grieve for women and families who are less able to exercise their freedom and dignity today, and who those who will be less free in the weeks and months to come, because of the decision released on Friday. I'm not a lawyer or a constitutional scholar, so I'm not in a position to give an informed opinion about whether the decision was correct in its reasoning. But it does feel cruel to remove rights that women and their families have relied on for almost 50 years, longer than my lifetime. We know from the era before the Roe decision that women are harmed, and some will die, when they don't have the freedom to make these choices. It's encouraging to see so many companies offering to pay for their employees to travel to other states, if they're not able to get the care they need at home. But people shouldn't need to rely on the generosity of their employer for something that should be a matter of basic human dignity.

Our scripture lesson today shows Jesus setting his face to go to Jerusalem. His ministry has taken a decisive turn, and now he's setting out for the place where, we're told, he is to be "taken up." And as he goes along on this journey, people react to him in different ways. There's a village of the Samaritans that takes offense simply because he's headed for Jerusalem, where the Jewish people say God has chosen to make a home on earth, and not Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans worship the same God. The Samaritans shut their doors to Jesus and his friends, and won't welcome them. So James and John ask Jesus whether they should pray for God's fire to consume the village. Jesus says no, and wags his finger at the two of them for even suggesting that representatives of God's kingdom should impose their will through violence and control.

And likewise, when it comes to all those who come forward to follow Jesus, Jesus does not hesitate to let them know the heavy cost of what they are asking. Those who follow the Son of Man, Jesus says, have nowhere to lay their head. They have a higher, more pressing duty to the kingdom than they do even to their own families, he tells the man who wants to follow after burying his parents. And the journey is so urgent that there is not even time to bid family farewell. These are hard asks. But ultimately Jesus leaves space for them to choose. He is clear about his direction. He is honest about what it means for those who want to follow him. He turns no one away and freely extends an invitation—"follow me"—but he doesn't punish and he doesn't force the decision. If folks aren't ready, he simply moves on, because his face is set toward Jerusalem.

We're part of a tradition in Western Christianity that has often forgotten this lesson. From the Middle Ages right through to our Puritan forebears in New England—who persecuted and drove out into the wilderness those who didn't share their beliefs—up to nineteenth and twentieth century laws governing intimate relationships and the life of couples and families, Christians have acted like James and John, looking to punish and control those who are different, rather than simply move on toward the destination—a destination where, for Jesus in this story, is going to offer up his own life. As that part of our legacy continues to harm our neighbors, it's fitting for us to repent, and to examine ourselves for all the ways we still seek to dominate and control others. How can we help to bear the burdens of our neighbors, rather than turn away or impose new ones?

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back," Jesus says, "is fit for the kingdom of God." God's kingdom is not about looking back, with the hope of restoring some imagined greatness from the past. It's about plowing and planting the seeds of the harvest to come.

In this story, Jesus' destination is clear. For us, especially right now, the

destination, the place where God is calling us, is not always apparent. But God continues to call us to follow.

Are you being called to mend the brokenness in your personal relationships? That's a destination. Are you being asked to consider a new way of being Jesus' disciple? That's a destination too. Are you being invited to serve and advocate for people who are oppressed and have no voice—the poor, the homeless, the hungry, and others? That too is a destination. What is the One Big Thing that God is calling you to do, maybe not with the rest of your life, but right now? How are you being invited to give shape to God's Kingdom within the bounds of your activities and responsibilities? What is your destination? And are you moving toward it with urgency and intentionality, like Jesus? Or are you beset and distracted by other things?

Your destination is important. But it's not the beginning and end of your relationship with God. I want you to know your destination, because I believe that when our lives and our actions are aligned with God's plans for us we find a kind of peace that we can't find anywhere else. But whatever your destination, whether you're moving toward or away from it, know that Jesus has a destination too. His face is set toward Jerusalem. His love for you takes him unswervingly and steadfastly toward Calvary, toward the cross. His face is set, and he's prepared to suffer for you, so that whatever your immediate destination may be, your final, lasting home is always and forever with God. Amen.