

# Nothing in the Way

[Luke 9:51-60]

K Karpen, Preached Sunday, June 27, 2004

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"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James & John saw that, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go!" And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

To another, Jesus said, "Follow me." But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said, "Let the dead bury the dead, but as for you, go proclaim the kingdom of God."

Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home."

Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

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"Look, here is water!

What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Today's two Biblical encounters take place not in a synagogue or the Temple or a church, but on the streets. On the road to Jerusalem, Jesus encounters: unreceptive Samaritans, vindictive disciples, and a set of somewhat reluctant followers.

On the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, the apostle Philip encounters a man we know not by his name, but by his nationality, his job, his race, and his sexuality: the Ethiopian eunuch.

When Jesus encounters the Samaritans through his disciples James and John, they reject his particular brand of faith. Why? Because Jesus is facing Jerusalem, and Samaritans believe God should be worshiped instead on Mt. Gerizim. Jesus says, "Oh well."

The disciples say, "How about this? We will call down fire from heaven to consume them in the fiery hell they deserve." To James and John, these guys are the bad Samaritans. Luke says, "Jesus turned and rebuked them." He has to turn, because he's already gone on. He's ready for the next village. He's ready for the next encounter. He's ready to issue the next call.

He knows he's not for everyone. But he's for anyone who wants to respond to his call. He's not for everyone! But he is for anyone who chooses to reply to his invitation.

He moves on to the next encounter with someone who says, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus says, "Great; just remember I'm broke, I'm homeless, and I'm on my way to Jerusalem to die."

On to the next encounter: He says to someone, "Follow me." The person says, "OK, fine. But first let me go and bury my father."

"Is he dead?"

"No. But this is just gonna kill him." (I embellish a little.) Jesus says, "Let the dead bury the dead. You go to proclaim God's kingdom."

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On to the next encounter: Someone says, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me say farewell to those at my home." And Jesus says, according to Luke: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God!"

Jesus is not for everyone. But he's for anyone who's ready to move ahead with him.

Look ahead to the book that today we might call "Luke 2:" The Acts of the Apostles. In Acts, all roads lead from Jerusalem. From Jerusalem out to the rest of the world, spreading the Gospel message of love & freedom to ever more unlikely people in ever more unlikely places.

Earlier in this same chapter, the apostle Philip travels back through Samaria and preaches about Jesus. This time, says Luke, "The crowds with one accord listen eagerly to what was said by Philip." People were healed. People were baptized. People received the power of the holy spirit.

Then Philip travels from Jerusalem to Gaza, and along the way he meets the Ethiopian eunuch, who comes by in his chariot, and overtakes Philip. The man is an unlikely person for the message of the Gospel. He's a foreigner. He's rich. He's powerful. He is a Jew or a convert to Judaism, but as a eunuch, a castrated male, he is an outcast within the faith community.

Of course, as Jesus himself points out, there are eunuchs and eunuchs. He says, "There are eunuchs who are eunuchs from birth, (from birth, that's strange) some made so by others, and still others who choose to be for the sake of the kingdom." [Matthew 19] That's as much as Jesus says on the point.

Still, in Jewish culture, eunuchs are sexual outcasts, sexual suspects, sexual deviants. He's been in Jerusalem, worshipping in the temple, but maybe he's done so quietly, in the closet. But the spirit drives Philip to the side of the eunuch's chariot, and he hears the eunuch reading aloud from the scroll of Isaiah.

Eunuchs are prohibited from full participation in Israelite worship by the law as laid out in Deuteronomy 23. But Isaiah 56 promises the full inclusion of eunuchs and foreigners and other outcasts in the time of the messiah. "To the eunuch I will give, within my house & within my walls a monument and a name: an everlasting name."

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And it is Isaiah who writes in chapter 55, "Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters." And he's not talking about Poland Spring and Perrier. He's talking about the kingdom of God.

Liberals are so afraid of the Bible. Be bold with the Bible. It's got your back.

Philip says rather condescendingly, maybe nervously, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the eunuch responds graciously with the first of three questions. "How can I, unless somebody guides me?"

Philip jumps in beside him. They read more Isaiah: "In humiliation justice was denied him." The eunuch asks question number 2: "Is the prophet writing about himself or about someone else?"

And Philip tells him the good news about Jesus. But that brings on question number 3. As they drive along the road, they come to a pond. The eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" And Philip opens his mouth and nothing comes out.

Come on, Philip! Isn't the answer "Everything!" The guy is a freak! He's a sexual outcast! He's a sexual suspect! But out of Philip's mouth comes nothing, and there's the answer: Nothing.

And the next second, Philip and the eunuch tumble out of the chariot, scramble down to the pond, and splash into the water. Cleansing them both. Renewing them both in the name of Jesus Christ. With nothing between their souls and their savior.

Friends, we've all got some washing up to do. The whole Christian community, which needs to remember that Jesus may not be for everyone, but he's for anyone drawn to him. Which needs to remember that Baptism may not be for everyone, but it's for anyone who is called to the waters.

Ministry is not for everyone. But God knows it is for anyone called by God—By God!!—to ordination.

We've all got some washing up to do. Conservatives who want to deny full participation in the leadership of the church to Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgenders, and other queer folk, as if we're not all queer in our own way.

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Liberals got some washing up to do. We liberals, who want to ask God to rain down fire on the heads of the stubborn.

We've got some washing up to do. Paul asks the Romans what can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. The answer is nothing. So who are we to do that sinful separating?

There's nothing between my soul & my savior.  
Nothing between, e'en many hard trials,  
Though this whole world against me convene,  
Watching with prayer & much self-denial;  
I'll triumph at last! There's nothing between.