

A couple of weeks ago I stopped following my clock. I didn't stop following EVERY clock - just the one in my office. Because it literally has a mind of its own. It's radio controlled, it's supposed to set itself. But a couple of weeks ago I discovered that it was suddenly 4 hours slow. I have no idea why & I haven't bothered to figure it out. Because what's the point of buying a clock with a mind of its own if you still have to set it yourself?

My "solution" is that I've just stopped following the clock. The good news is that I still have plenty of other clocks to follow. I have a clock on my computer, a clock on my smartphone, and most of the time I still have a clock on my wrist. I'm actually toying with the idea of getting rid of the clock in my office altogether. Except I still find myself looking at it all the time. I can't help it. At least a couple of times an hour I still find myself glancing at it, maybe just long enough to remember that I'm not really following it. As the weeks roll by, what's even more interesting is that I'm getting used to living with a clock that I don't follow. I've even found ways to make it useful. Because the minute-hand (the long one) is still correct. It's the just the hour-hand (the short one) that's 4 hours slow. So I can still glance at the minute-hand to get a "feel" for the right time - even though I stopped following the clock weeks ago.

Now, my relationship with that clock is kind of silly, I know. But here's the thing. It's the same kind of relationship we face with Jesus all the time. Just like my silly relationship with that clock, we all live in a world where it's easy to look

at Jesus without ever following. It's always been that way. Maybe some of us look at Jesus and see an ancient figure who's out of sync with our time. Maybe he was helpful back in the day, but now he seems at least a couple thousand years slow. After all, if the whole point of religion is having some guidance for our lives, why bother following an ancient rabbi if we still have to do all the work of figuring out what he means today? It's like using a clock that's 4 hrs slow. It's why some people toy with the idea of getting rid of Jesus altogether.

Except billions of us, still find ourselves looking at Jesus all the time. We can't help it. Maybe some of us look at Jesus just long enough to remember we're not really following. Maybe some of us have gotten so used to living with a savior we don't follow that we find other ways of making him useful. Maybe we look for comforting words that help us get a "feel" for Jesus, even if we don't follow.

We all do it - me too - at least some of time. But wherever we happen to be or however we happen to feel, today's Gospel is an invitation to not just look at Jesus but to consider how we might actually follow the Jesus we find at the center of our faith. It's an invitation both to look *and* to follow.

Today's reading in Luke is the beginning of a travel narrative in the Gospel. For the next 10 chapters Jesus is on a road trip to Jerusalem. Turns out we're not the only ones who take summer road trips. In the Lectionary calendar, Jesus does too. Today, right at the beginning of his road trip, Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face" for Jerusalem. It means he's on a mission, because Jesus knows that when he

arrives in Jerusalem he's in for a showdown with the powers & authorities who rule the day. The entire journey ends up being a kind of tutorial in following Jesus. The journey is where we find most of his parables. And here at the beginning, Luke wants to show us the meaning & the value of following Jesus on the journey. He wants to show us what it costs & what it's worth. Because for Luke, and for Christians ever since, following this Jesus has always meant, sooner or later, some kind of confrontation or showdown with the powers & authorities who rule the day.

From the beginning of the journey we learn that any showdown for Jesus is going to be nonviolent. He's not marching into a firefight. Because here at the beginning two of his disciples - James & John - make a ridiculous suggestion to incinerate anyone who happens to get in their way. In all fairness to James & John, some of Israel's great prophets, (like Elijah) did use fire in just that way. But Jesus says, "No!" Following him is not like that. Instead of literal fire, we feel the spiritual fire (?) of three people who encounter Jesus, who look at him, & then consider what it means to follow.

The first person who comes racing up to Jesus is so eager they actually volunteer to follow on their own. It's kind of bold, kind of brash. Maybe they haven't really thought it through. Maybe they see Jesus - they look at him - and don't really think about following so much as getting a feel, adding some interest or color to their life. Maybe he'll offer a new experience or new meaning - and

surely that's true. But the *way* Jesus adds interest, color or meaning to our lives is by first emptying our lives of our most familiar strengths and securities. “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,” (Lk 9:58). Following Jesus begins by emptying ourselves.

We don't do it by necessarily selling our homes. We do it by learning to see the places we call "home" in a whole new way. Because all the places we call “home” are the places we expect our most familiar strength & security. All the places we call “home” are the places we evaluate from the perspective of our own security and strength.¹ Before Jesus can add anything meaningful to our lives he says, *let it go*. Let go of your most familiar & most reliable expectations for strength, security & control. Not to become a wandering spirit. Not to reject the importance of our safety & security. But simply to avoid the tendency to follow our own power. Following Jesus begins by letting go; by trusting him even more than we trust ourselves.

It sounds kind of jarring - even constricting - but what if we approach it from the other side? Think about it like this. If someone says they're going camping, that usually means letting go of some familiar comforts & controls, some reliable security and amenities that we call home. Camping usually means adapting to a different environment and learning to trust new ways of doing even the most basic

¹ Justo L. González, *Luke*, p. 115.

things. We even use terms like “roughing it.” Instead of curling up with bedsheets that have a thread count 1,200, you sleep on the ground and you cook over a flame. If someone says they’re “camping” with a 40 foot RV in a parking lot with electricity, plumbing, satellite TV, & a well-stocked fridge - that sounds less like camping and more like a change of scenery. That’s not what camping is. And Jesus is getting at the same kind of thing.

Following Jesus isn’t just about a change of scenery. It’s about our deepest trust. It’s about trusting the way of Jesus & the Spirit of Jesus, even more than we trust ourselves. Instead of curling up with our most familiar practices and ways of doing things, we learn to trust new ways of doing even the most basic things. Instead of relying on our own cleverness, efficiency or brute strength, we learn to trust the path of patience, generosity & suffering love. Then - and maybe only then - is when we discover the meaning of following Jesus. We discover the meaning when we trust his way of life with everything.

And then, after we discover the meaning of following Jesus, we discover the value of following Jesus. We discover the value when we learn to see him at the center of our lives, not the margins. That’s what these other 2 people discover about following Jesus. These other characters both meet Jesus when they obviously have something else at the center of their lives; good things, but other things. The first one says he has to bury his dad. And scholars debate what that means. Maybe it means his father is healthy & happy, and it’s just a way of saying he’ll follow

Jesus someday when his father is no longer around. Maybe his father is really about to die. Or maybe his father is already dead - because burial in the ancient world was a two-stage process. The first stage was wrapping a body in cloth & spices in a tomb and then waiting a year for it to decompose. The second stage was gathering the bones and placing them in a box. Maybe this guy is in the middle of a grieving period between stage 1 and stage 2.

Whatever the case, Jesus invites a living urgency into the middle of this man's death watch. It's the same thing that happens with the last person in the story. Jesus tells this third person that following him is like putting your hand on a moving vehicle. It's like grabbing a live wire; like strapping yourself behind a dozen oxen - which reminds us of today's story about Elisha. For Elisha, following the prophet Elijah meant releasing a plow. Jesus says following him is like grabbing a plow. Or, if that image doesn't work for you, try something contemporary like waterskiing. Think about trying to waterski when you're facing the wrong direction and the driver decides to hit the throttle. If you're turned around & fumbling for a rope, you're not ready to follow a boat when it yanks you out of the water.

It's an effective image for following Jesus. But the question is why? Why would following Jesus ever feel like that? Why would it ever feel so jarring, so shocking, like it might actually yank us off our feet? Why? Especially when we hear St. Paul tell us that it's, "for freedom that Christ has set us free?" (Gal. 5.1).

Paul even picks up the same imagery by telling us “not to submit to a yoke of slavery,” (Gal. 5.1). Paul says not to strap ourselves onto any way of life that would enslave us. So why would following Jesus ever feel so jarring or even constricting?

Maybe it's simply a matter of following the right time. Try this. If we want to keep playing with the clock imagery, maybe you & I are the clocks with a mind of our own, maybe we're the ones out of sync with God's time in Jesus. Right? If that's how we frame it then no wonder following Jesus is going to feel so jarring or even constricting if we're the ones who are actually 4 hrs. slow. No wonder it feels jarring if we think it's time to be angry, and Jesus says it's time to love. No wonder it feels constricting if we think it's time to help ourselves, and Jesus says it's time to help others. No wonder it feels jarring if we think it's time to defend our rights and Jesus says it's time to sacrifice for the sake of our enemies.

That's what Paul is getting at in his letter to the Galatians. You see that Galatian church had simply been marking their own time. They'd simply been following their own power, without realizing how far behind Jesus they actually were. And Paul has to tell them that true freedom isn't following our own time, any more than pretending we decide when the sun rises & the day begins. That's silly. Paul says true freedom is following God's time; the time we find revealed in Jesus. True freedom is living by the Spirit of Jesus. And “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-

control,” (Gal 5:22–23). Those aren’t the kinds of things we discover by simply following our own power or marking our own time. And it can feel incredibly jarring to live by the fruit of the Spirit if we’re not already living in God’s time.

We live in a world with plenty of things to follow; good things. It’s always been easy to look at Jesus, without following. Fair enough. But friends, if we’re the church; if we’re the people summoned & called to live in God’s time by the power of God’s Spirit, the only way it’s ever going to happen is if we can both look at Jesus and follow Jesus. It’s never going to happen if we’re simply marking our own time. It’s only going to happen by following Jesus to the end of the journey, trusting that the life we find in Jesus - the patterns, the rhythms & spirit of Jesus - are not only the best way to receive God’s love but also to share God’s love with the world. *Amen.*