

# “On Second Thought”

Luke 9:57-62



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# On Second Thought

The issue was a new car - not whether we would get one, but what kind of car we should get. I was in high school at the time, and so I had definite opinions about what I would prefer to drive on those too rare occasions when I was granted use of the car. From my point of view replacing our old boxy station wagon with another boxy station wagon was definitely a mistake. I knew I had no chance of arguing for a convertible, but I thought I had a shot at a decent looking sedan. So I entered into the discussion armed with a list of what I believed to be irrefutable arguments. My sister and I were older now, I pointed out. Our car no longer needed to haul around bulky childhood toys or equipment. Plus, a four door sedan is easier to park and it will take up less room in the garage. When you go out with Aunt Mary and Uncle Bob it will be more comfortable and look nicer. The back window won't get as dirty. The radio will sound better. You get more color choices.

My father was getting a bit perturbed, but I figured I could give it one more shot - my final appeal - "I'm sure it would be safer if you're ever in an accident." I could see my father's face tighten and I braced myself. "John," he said, "You think too much!"

To this day I'm not sure whether that was veiled praise or a put down or a message that all my arguments had gotten me absolutely nowhere. It is a strange critique - "You think too much". After all we want to be a reasonable and rational people, so generally speaking we regard thinking as a good thing. We often describe the goal of education as "teaching people to think". We do not abide fools. And yet, I'd guess that each of us can remember more than once when someone else's "thinking" became just plain annoying; when we were convinced that they had misled or distorted the conversation being overly analytical, that they had substituted words for convictions. I see some of that in the situation where Jesus finds himself in the passage we just read from Luke.

As Luke sets it out, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee. Galilee in the north and Judea in the south were provinces that were

primarily Jewish. In between were the provinces of Samaria, Decapolis, and Perea. Because of the long-standing rivalry and bitterness between the Jews and the Samaritans, most Jewish travelers chose to go to Judea - where Jerusalem was located - by way of Perea on the east side of the Jordan River. Perea had a mixed population and didn't reflect any particular ideology. Although Jesus was known to travel back and forth through Samaria, it appears that on this trip he and his disciples were using the route through Perea.

His journey brings him into contact with three people, each of whom professes a readiness to follow him. And yet, in each instance the conversation turns testy. What Luke wants us to see is that behind each affirmation is some less-than-adequate or perhaps mis-directed thinking.

The first would-be disciple says I will follow you wherever you go. And while we are applauding this faith commitment, Jesus seems to be picking at it. "Foxes have holes," he says "and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head".

Jesus is raising the issue of "journey" versus "destination". You and I can be easily seduced by a Christian faith that looks like a pilot's pre-flight check list. We assume we know all the necessary pieces. We make our way down the list of things to believe and behaviors to adopt, and situations to avoid, and after putting checks in all the appropriate boxes we are set to go. We are ready to count ourselves among the disciples - the followers of Jesus.

But Jesus is quick to point out that there is no itemized list; that following someone with no place to lay his head means you never arrive; that you are always "in process". As Paul said, you are always "working out your own salvation with fear and trembling"; always on the way. To use a political parallel on this week when we mark our nation's independence, democracy is always a work-in-progress. It is never full accomplished or achieved, but must be pursued through the constant challenges and changes of the times. The moment when we decide we've got it, is the moment we are most at risk of losing it.

We are not told how this would-be disciple responded to the additional information Jesus offered, but that first encounter quickly leads

to another “Lord. I will follow you,” says the next person, “but let me first go and bury my father”. What could be a more understandable request? And yet Jesus replies sternly, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” Not only is his rebuke totally lacking in sympathy, it is also illogical. How can the dead bury their own dead? What is his point?

There is the temptation to try to soften this sharp-edged retort by suggesting that the man’s father may not be dead yet, and that Jesus was criticizing him because he was planning to go home and live for many years until his father died - and then he would follow Jesus. If that were the case we could more easily understand Jesus’ lack of sympathy. But that manufactured scenario distorts the intent of Jesus’ words. His point is that loyalty to him takes precedence over any so-called primary obligations. As he had said on another occasion, “Whoever loves mother or father more than me is not fit to be my disciple”.(Matt. 10:37) The radical nature of discipleship “lies in Jesus’ claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said choose him over the devil, but choose him over the family (Luke, Craddock, Pg. 144)” - over financial security, over national loyalty, over personal safety, over things that matter.

This message about singularity of dedication and commitment carries into the third exchange. That person asks simply for a chance to go home and say some goodbyes. Again the point of the conversation has less to do with saying goodbye and more to do with focus. Jesus uses an illustration about trying to plow a straight furrow while looking in several different directions. His point may be lost on us city dwellers. But we could resonate if he had used talking on a cell phone while driving and eating a Big Mac! Discipleship is not built on accumulation.

The more logical explanations and meaningful activities we try to incorporate into our definition of discipleship, the more we put that discipleship at risk. Here’s what can happen: We decide that the USA is a Christian country, so being a good citizen makes me a good Christian. The Salvation Army is a Christian organization, so supporting the Salvation Army shows I am a good Christian. Or - even closer to home - this is a Christian church, so belonging to the Church of the Palms identifies me as a disciple of Jesus Christ, entitled to all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. On one level all of these statements can be true, but from Jesus’ point of view, we are thinking too much and following too little! We are looking

around, gathering evidence and arguments to justify being able to keep doing what we're doing - living as we've always lived - and yet claiming to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

I'm not trying to undermine the bonds of family or the enthusiasm of your Fourth of July celebration. But if you find yourself coming up with check lists and resumes and long strings of reasons why you should be counted among the faithful, you may want to step back - and stop thinking so much. Discipleship is about holding a singular focus, a focus on Christ as Lord and Savior - a focus represented here, at this Table, in these symbols of bread and cup. Symbols of his life, death, resurrection, grace and salvation. Here is food for the journey - the journey that never ends - the journey of our lifetime. Here we meet our Lord - and FOCUS - and say, "You lead. I'll follow." Let's get started, now! No excuses! Amen.





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