

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor
First Christian Church
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The Olympic Games of Faith: What Do You Do After the Game is Done?

Luke 9:57-62 Revised Standard Version As they were going along the road, someone said to [Jesus], "I will follow you wherever you go." 58And 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." 59To another [Jesus] said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." 60But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." 61Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." 62Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Philippians 3:12-14 12 New Century Version I do not mean that I am already as God wants me to be. I have not yet reached that goal, but I continue trying to reach it and to make it mine. Christ wants me to do that, which is the reason he made me his.13 Brothers and sisters, I know that I have not yet reached that goal, but there is one thing I always do. Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead,14 I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ to the life above.

You know that old joke about the dog who, every morning for years, chased the school bus every morning and afternoon? Then one day, he caught it and thought to himself "NOW what do I do??" Every one of us, I suspect, has had that experience of working for something for a long time, planning towards a goal, doing all those things necessary – perhaps saving money or even getting a part-time job – and then finally achieving the goal we had so long worked toward, only to discover that unexpected and unwelcome feeling that it is not really so satisfying as we long-thought and imagined it would be. Do you know the television series "*Friday Night Lights*"? Set in Odessa, Texas, not far from where Barbara and I lived for a couple of years, it is the continuing story of a high-school football team in football-obsessed West Texas. The series is based on a movie of the same name, a movie which followed one season in the lives of those on that team, their friends, their relatives. And one of the saddest, most poignant scenes in that movie is when is when one of the characters, now in his thirties, who had played on that team when he was in high school but is now watching the game twenty

years later from the sidelines, says to a friend about their years on the team, *"It's all been downhill from there, hasn't it?"* You can almost imagine Bruce Springsteen in the background singing "Glory Days," pining for those bygone days of friends and freedom, instead of those creeping complexities of adulthood. Or maybe it's John Cougar Mellencamp, singing that oh-so-haunting line, *"Life goes on long after the thrill of living is gone."* Glory days, can be, well, glorious, and who among us has not occasionally pined for some point in the past when our bodies were less creaky and our eyesight was clearer and the future looked utterly open? Who among us has not looked longingly at some earlier point in life when we had caught whatever school bus we'd been chasing but now we turn around and stare back at what used to be and sigh for it?

Jesus' words this morning have something to say to us. For we are like those Olympic athletes whom we've been thinking about these last four weeks and who now face the same choice that our friend from *Saturday Night Lights* faced: to turn and forever look backwards at some high point that has been achieved, comparing everything else from then on to it, or moving forward some how, some way. Yet Jesus' words seem pretty harsh here, don't they? Recall how the story describes this encounter: One day, three people come to Jesus, asking to follow him. They seem to us like good people with good intentions. But Jesus brings them up short. The first one comes and says, *"Lord, I will follow you anywhere."* But Jesus answers, *"Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."* And that's all that he said. One wonders if the man wanted to say, *"Uh, did you hear what I said?"* Jesus then turns to another man and says, *"Follow me."* And the man says, *"I will. But first I must bury my father."* In those few words we picture a dying father, a devoted son caring for him in his final hours; we hurt for him and respect him for wanting to do right by his father. But Jesus responds to him: *"Let the dead bury their own dead...."* Wow. You aren't going to find this line on a tea towel or Hallmark card,

are you? Finally, a third man comes to him and says, *“Lord, I’ll follow you. I’ll go home now and say goodbye to my family.”* And its to **that** very reasonable request Jesus says: *“Listen, anyone who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”*

What’s going on here?? As my wife Barbara once poignantly put it in one of her sermons in regard to this story, *“Of course, we take care of our loved ones. To be a Christian is not a license for family neglect. It is not to become inhuman. Indeed, it is to grow more human. And it is a sacred human duty to care for those who are family!”*¹ True indeed! So why IS Jesus so harsh with a son who needs to bury his father, and with a man who wants to go home and embrace his loved ones and do what is the respectful thing? What could Jesus possibly want us to understand from these lines?

At the risk of seriously dating myself, I know that some of you will also recall the old Ed Sullivan show from the 1960s. It was at the time the best of many now long-gone variety shows. It is probably most famous for hosting the Beatles’ American debut, but the show also booked all kinds of completely unknown acts. And one of those acts, seemingly every few months, as Barbara reminded me not too long ago when we were talking about our childhoods, was the plate spinner. The stage would be filled with tall, narrow poles that were flexible - 10, 20 of them. And that month’s plate-spinner guy would come on stage and place at the top of each pole a plate, a china plate. The point was to keep each plate spinning and to keep any from falling. Have you seen that act? It’s pretty amazing. And I don’t know about you but that seems to me a image, sometimes, of how my life is:

Spin this plate for God.

¹Rev. Barbara Blaisdell, from a sermon preached August 17, 2008, at United Community Church, Hilo. I am, in fact, enormously indebted to Rev. Blaisdell for the structure and many felicitous phrases.

Spin this plate for the church

Spin this plate for the family

Spin this plate for me

Spin this plate for work

Spin this one for everybody else that needs me.

But then it struck me: Perhaps Jesus means by these disturbing sentences that you and I have this inclination, at times, to also make God just one more plate to be spun, just one more thing alongside of all the other things to keep successfully whirling . We seem to have so many plates, and we so often oscillate from one to the next, from commitment to commitment, trying to meet the needs of each, spinning, spinning, spinning.

No wonder we're so busy! No wonder we're so often tired and seemingly split apart! The point? Well, I think Jesus' harsh-sounding words are for knocking down those spinning plates in order to give us a better way. What Jesus is trying to get us to see, I think, is that when we are trying to truly follow Him, we don't simply stand at the center of multiple commitments pivoting dervishly from one to the other. No, when we move, Jesus is trying to get us to see, we are to move forward with a single, overarching commitment, a single thing that can orient everything else we do. Not just one more commitment among all the other commitments, one more plate to spin, but **THE** commitment that gives us our direction and our hope, so that with all that we are and all that we have, we pursue the one desire of loyalty to the promise and purposes of God. And we do this with God not as a priority, for God is not one among priorities, and not even our first priority. For God is the whole ground that we stand on, the source of our being, the goal that we move toward; God – to recur to our images – is the stage on which we stand as we spin any of our plates, not just one more plate that we are supposed to make time for and feel guilty when we don't.

Now, if we begin to get Jesus' point here, if we try to orient our direction toward God, all these other concerns do not dissipate, all those other plates are still spinning. But that spinning can come to have an overarching guide and goal. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that to keep moving forward in God's purpose is to no longer be scattered and wildly whirling about, but to have a unified life that goes in one direction, with all those other things oriented around that straight line toward God that He's portraying. He's saying that it is not the past that we are called to look to for the high point of our life, but, as the quirky picture on our bulletin this morning has it, we are called to orient everything about our lives to the promise God has for us of life abundant and eternal.

But all that may feel rather abstract. So let's return to the image that Jesus himself uses in our scripture today, and it will give us a lovely, down-home cue to what He means. Did you hear Him in that last line? He said what He's getting at is like plowing. Now, fortunately, I've never had to walk behind a plow. Have any of you? What do you do when you plow? Well, first of all, you don't push it. To push a plow is just plain futile. No, you hitch up to a horse or a mule or an ox who pulls it. What you do is walk behind. You harness yourself in and take hold and get moving. I'm told by those who've done it that you have to move pretty quickly and that you always, always *lean forward*. As you move along, the plowshare cuts deep into the soil, slicing the earth open, folding it back to form a furrow. You walk behind the pull, to keep the cut moving, to see the depth and the direction of the rows. And, what's more, in order to keep that furrow straight you can't let your attention wander anywhere but to a point on the horizon ahead. Fixing your gaze on a tree or a fence post ahead, your steps will follow and so will the plow. Jesus says **this** is what it's like to live a faithful life. You lean forward, you keep moving, and you don't keep looking back. Because if you do,

you stop moving or you head off in the wrong direction, or go in crazy circles that take you nowhere at all.

Now, most of us will likely never have the opportunity to walk behind a plow. But I bet many of us have walked behind a lawnmower. I certainly have, even though I seem to be doing my best to kill my yard so as to make further mowing unnecessary. But when you do mow, you see the same sort of thing as when you plow. Can you imagine mowing the lawn with your head looking back over your shoulder...? *“Oops — sorry about the flower-bed, Mom.”* Not only would you run over things that lie ahead, mowing them all down – weeds and flowers and all – but you’d also get distracted by all the stuff you missed mowing behind you. What would it look like when you were done? Well, it might look a little like some of our lives may have been looking, when we don’t face forward or move onward. It might look like what happens when you teach a child to drive a stick shift – something I have done, although I did feel like I needed therapy afterwards – with the car lurching forward and backward, left and right, as steering and clutch and brake and gas war with each other. What I use to tell the child I was teaching, both of us white-knuckled, is keep it steady, focus your eyes out ahead of you, not from side to side, certainly not backwards or down at your feet or at your hand on the shift knob. Look forward, keep it steady, focus on where you want to be not where you have been.

Now, of course, everyone sometimes feels the pull of the past, that desire to look backwards, upon their lives, the temptation at times to think that something “back there” is as good as it’s going to get. And everyone feels the pull of past failures, disappointments, and sins, those times when you caught that school-bus and it didn’t really satisfy at all. There isn’t a life in this room that isn’t littered behind it with all kinds of events and encounters and sins that we wish had never been. And they too can pull on us like a magnet pulls tacks, luring us to turn around and look back and run through

it all again. There's the pull of **resentment** that whirls us back to suck on an old bitterness. There's the pull of **regret** that sends us running back to pound on the closed door of the past, saying, *"If only.... If only."* There's the pull of **remorse** which sends us back, beating our breasts, saying, *"Oh how I wish I hadn't...."* There's the profound pull of those past patterns that used to be killing us that we've worked hard to overcome but which still call our names. They seductively say, *"Come back. **This is who you are. This is what you do.**"* It's the easiest thing in the world to go back to those past patterns. But it isn't really **living**. God has set before us a life. And to live that life you must look forward, lean forward, if you will, to a point on the horizon, **your** point, the point where God is indeed the ground of all priorities, the one who makes it possible to spin any plates at all. Christ is there, at that point on the horizon, saying, *"Follow me, now, in this day that I give you for living, loving, and moving forward."*

So the question this morning is this: can you, will you, turn and fix your gaze on Him? And if it seems that you can't seem to stop looking backwards, if you can't seem to stop spinning plates that are labeled guilt, or remorse, or hurt, or resentment, then ask Him about it.

-- *"Lord, I messed up back there. I ruined everything." "It's all forgiven,"* He says. *"All of it. Let go and follow me."*

-- *"Lord, someone did me wrong back there. I am hurt." "I can heal you,"* He says. *"Let it go and follow me."*

-- *"Lord, this ground is strange and unfamiliar. I don't know where I am. I want to go back to what I used to know." "Child,"* He says, *"I am leading you forward and I am leading you toward home. Let me lead. Follow me."*

Indeed, the Apostle Paul said it beautifully; can his words become yours? *"Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, I keep trying to reach the goal and get the*

prize for which God called me through Christ....” Put your hand to the plow and don't look back. For ahead, just up ahead on the horizon is the unending love of God, the promise of life abundant and eternal. That, my friends, is the gospel for this and every day, and for that gospel, thanks be to God!