

**+ Luke 9:51-62 + Following Jesus Is All or Nothing +
+ 6th Sunday after Pentecost: Confirmation of Brandon Kautz + 26 June 2016 +**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, especially you dear Brandon,

It's tough to sit on a fence. Now if you're turned towards either side, it's not as tough, but if you try to sit on a fence like riding a bike, it's not just tough. It's uncomfortable, painful, even risky—and it usually doesn't last too long. Sure, you might have a little better view than a person of average height, but after a while sitting on that fence starts to get painful. It's not a comfortable position to sit in. Plus you have to be concerned about balance. You have to maintain equal balance on both sides at the same time. Tip too much either way—and you lose your balance and fall off the fence.

I don't know about you, but I'd rather not spend my time riding a fence. Yet in spite of how uncomfortable and challenging and even painful sitting on a fence can be, do you ever catch yourself basically doing that? You don't want to make a major decision so you ride the fence until you can't anymore. You don't want to face a difficult family situation so you ride the fence until you can't anymore. We do it because it seems like the easiest way. We hope to remain neutral, but when you're in the middle of it, it's almost impossible to be neutral. So you "ride the fence" until the decision is made for you or the situation blows up or you face reality and pick a side.

Now this might sound rather strange, but sometimes you and I act like we're sitting on a fence when it comes to following Jesus. When following him is easy or beneficial or convenient, when it's all sunshine and high highs and joy upon joy, of course we want to follow Jesus!

...But anyone who follows Jesus quickly finds out that it's not always that way. Following Jesus is not always sunshine and high highs and joy upon joy. At times it can be quite difficult, painful, risky, even dangerous. What then? Well...following Jesus isn't something you and I naturally want to do at all costs. In fact, at times like that, you'd much rather hop off the fence and take the easier route, like staying silent when you need to speak up or when you need to object or doing what "saves your skin" now rather than suffer for the sake of your Savior or letting others or other things take priority over Jesus. So you try to sit on the fence, but in the end, you really can't follow Jesus while riding a fence. Later in this service, you'll hear a question that beautifully illustrates that very point. ***"Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching, and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?"*** (*Christian Worship: Occasional Services*) How would you answer? Your answer is important because **FOLLOWING JESUS IS ALL OR NOTHING.**

In the portion of God's Word before us from Luke 9, we see three attempts at fence-sitting Jesus following. Jesus is in the last year of his ministry. He is only weeks away from suffering and dying on the cross in the city of Jerusalem. We're told that ***"as the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."*** Along the way to Jerusalem, Jesus meets three fence-sitting followers. Let's meet them.

The first is a man who approaches Jesus. ***"As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.'"*** Now you'd think Jesus would be more than happy to have the man follow him. In fact, followers seeking popular teachers was a common practice back then, but that's the problem.

What was the man's reason for following Jesus? Well, by this time, Jesus had become enormously popular. He was unlike all the other rabbis and teachers of the Law. He was unlike the Romans and their heavy-handed form of government. In fact, many were hoping that his journey to Jerusalem would result in a new Jewish kingdom—maybe even an empire.

So you can understand where this man was coming from. He was eager to follow Jesus because it was the popular thing to do at the moment. Filled with eager energy, he even made the bold claim, ***"I will follow you wherever you go."*** But Jesus had a dose of reality for him. ***"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*** Following Jesus wouldn't be all glory and victory. In fact, it would more likely mean loss and hardship and suffering. Jesus didn't even have a permanent earthly home to lay his head. Even wild animals have that! Following Jesus would lead to the cross and even death. So what would the man do since following Jesus is all or nothing?

Following Jesus means sacrifice. You can have all the self-confidence and zeal in the world, but will that confidence hold up when you have to make real sacrifices to follow Jesus? Will that breathless excitement last

when you have to sacrifice house or home, even your livelihood for the sake of Christ? By nature, you and I don't want to sacrifice anything at all. We don't even want to give up a small portion of our income to support the work of the Lord. We'd rather use it on ourselves to do what we want when we want. So when Jesus talks about sacrificing for his sake, will I follow him all or nothing or try to ride the fence? Will you?

Jesus continued on towards Jerusalem and ***"he said to another man, 'Follow me.' But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'*** Now Jesus' response is surprising. ***"Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."*** Jesus wasn't trying to be cruel. He wasn't asking the man to dishonor his father. No, Jesus wanted this man to realize what should have top priority in his life. Someone else could take care of this man's family obligations, but following Jesus had to be his top priority—all or nothing—even above family.

Following Jesus means reordering my priorities. That's really tough for people like us in 21st Century America. Every one of us is encouraged, urged, even pushed into setting our priorities according to the world around us. You should be your own top priority. What you want and what you think should have higher priority than the needs of anyone else.

At the same time, isn't it true that our kids can become unexpected idols? Or how about the temptation to work yourself to death just to earn a little more or have a nice home and a lot of stuff that you never use? Maybe you're tempted to think that your top priority is your friends or your activities or your stuff, but following Jesus? Proclaiming the kingdom of God? Devoting some of your hard-earned time, energy, and money to serve the Lord? That falls pretty low on the priority list, and never quite gets up to the top. If your priorities are in line with the world and out of line with Christ, are you honestly committed to following Jesus or are you riding the fence?

There was one more man Jesus met on his way to Jerusalem. The man was willing to follow Jesus, but wanted to go back and say goodbye to his family. Jesus told him, ***"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."*** Now Jesus isn't saying that you should stop loving your family in order to follow him, but he is telling us that following him means no looking back. There's simply no way to follow Jesus while your attention is elsewhere. Following Jesus is all or nothing. It can't be on your terms. It has to be on his. If my attention is pulled in different directions, will I actually follow Jesus or just try to ride the fence?

Have you tried to follow Jesus from on top of a fence or have you followed him off that fence? Has following Jesus always been all or nothing for you? Looking into my own heart and looking back on my own life, all I can do is shake my head no. The truth is, if I try to follow Jesus while riding a fence, I am eventually going to fall off and that can be eternally dangerous. Far too often I fail to faithfully follow Jesus. So I follow him only when it's easy or convenient or when it fits my priorities. Far too often I am so distracted from faithfully following Jesus that you wonder if I'm even following him at all. What a poor, failed follower I have been and each of us have been!

Do you remember what Jesus was doing when he met those three fence-sitting followers? The time was approaching for Jesus to finish his work so he could be taken up into heaven in glory and power. For him to do that, he had to be completely focused on the task at hand—the task of going to Jerusalem not to take an earthly throne, but to suffer at the hands of sinful followers like us and die on the cross to pay for our failures to follow him.

That's what Jesus was doing when he ***"resolutely set out for Jerusalem."*** It was all or nothing. Jesus couldn't go to the cross while riding a fence. Jesus couldn't pay the price for our sins while trying to balance between what he might prefer and what had to be done. No, Jesus went to the cross knowing that he would face rejection—like he did in the Samaritan town, like he would at the hands of his enemies and the crowds of people he came to save, like he would at the hand of the government he had instituted, like he would by his own frightened followers. Yet Jesus still went to the cross—all or nothing—and he finished the job. He paid for your failures and mine.

Along the way Jesus continued to call people to follow him—and he calls you and me to follow him too. He knows we'll fail him. He knows we'll prefer the convenient and the easy, but in his gracious mercy, Jesus still seeks us out. Jesus still sends his Holy Spirit to work through our hearing and reading of his Holy Word. He still creates faith in our hearts through the good news that we have a Savior who did not fail in his all or nothing task.

...And so we follow him. On this Confirmation Day, Brandon, like so many before and after you, you will make an "all-or-nothing" vow to remain faithful to the Lord even to the point of death. You will fail as we have. With Christ's help, you can make that vow and we can renew that vow for ourselves with you. By faith, we fix our eyes on Jesus and follow him through difficulty and hardship, loss and danger, pain and death. It's all or nothing and we can't follow Jesus sitting on a fence. May our gracious God lead us forward then faithfully following Jesus from here to eternity. Amen.