

## *Signing on the Line*

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*When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he 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 and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he 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 he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first 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."*

- Luke 9:51-62

This coming Thursday, our nation will celebrate the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. We all know at least the outlines of the story. We know the names of at least some of those who signed the Declaration, especially those, such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, who went on to become presidents or to play other illustrious roles in the forging of our new nation.

Lesser known to most of us are those who did not fare so well after they signed on the line. Carter Braxton, Lyman Hall and John Witherspoon were just a few of the significant number of signers who, as a result of the Declaration and all that followed, lost their fortunes, or looked on as their properties were burned to the ground by British troops, or were accused of treason, or were imprisoned..

How often, as they suffered these diverse consequences, did they recall the last line of the document they had signed on that primordial 4th of July?

*"For the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."*

All of that history may at first seem far removed from Chicago's North Side on this morning of the 50<sup>th</sup> annual Pride Parade, now an exuberant festival with over a million annual participants. In that exuberance we may forget the first souls, about 150 of them, who first took to the same streets on this same last Sunday in June, 1970. In their own way, they were signing on the line for a safer and more just society, for themselves and others.

In the current hype and growing corporate sponsorship of the Pride Parade, it's also peculiarly easy to lose track of the countless numbers of souls who have lived with shame and fear, those who have been maligned, those who have courageously signed their own personal declarations, not knowing the consequences awaiting them in their families, in their workplaces or in terms of safety in their neighborhoods and homes. Many I know who are LGBT and Christian and who have shared their stories with me as pastor have particularly struggled or continue to struggle to get to the point of believing that, *"I, too, am made in the image of God, and I, also, am worthy of love."*

And now from 18<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia to 21<sup>st</sup> century Chicago to 1<sup>st</sup> century Samaria and the second half of today's gospel text from Luke. There we encounter three individuals who contemplate signing on the line with Jesus. They had no doubt been caught up in the festivity, the hope and the hype that seemed to be increasingly surrounding Jesus. They want more: "*Where do I sign? I'm ready.*"

In each case, Jesus directly or implicitly interrogates their motives. "*I will follow you wherever you go,*" says the first soul. In his response, Jesus implies that "*You have no real idea of where this could take you, the ultimate cost, what you'd have to give up, the uncertainty.*" Two others appear eager to follow, "*but first*" ... they have other priorities. Their apparent eagerness, it appears, is greater than their actual readiness for commitment. Many of us, I imagine, know that voice of "*but first*" within ourselves.

The connecting theme here seems to be the summons by Jesus to follow him. The summons divides the armchair believer from the true disciple. The summons also suggests immediacy. Here he is, standing before us, on his way to Jerusalem. The moment of decision won't be there in a year, or next week, or even in an hour. "*Follow me.*"

The gospel writer here no doubt intends for these three personal portraits in today's gospel to also capture the equivocation and the split allegiances lurking in the hearts of all of us. Their motives and choices ring true to the allegiances competing for our own hearts.

You or I may hear the '*Follow me*' in the plight of a neighbor in need, in the challenge to give up the known, the secure, the familiar. We may hear the '*Follow me*' when we're tempted to give up on a worthy commitment because we're tired or have no support or are misunderstood. Jesus may be waiting for you or me to sign on the line for the sake of our salvation or for some active commitment to a truer or more just household or church or workplace society. And of course I could go on and on here, describing various scenarios, without ever getting to the '*Follow me*' that may be most lively and pressing for you or for me.

A good and faithful veteran I once knew named George Weber decided that what he most wanted to do on his 80th birthday was to get his teeth cleaned. But he woke that day with wild heart palpitations, a cause for special alarm due to his health history. Despite the risk with his heart, George drove himself into the VA Hospital—and he went straight to the dentist! He went on in and got his teeth cleaned. Then, with a shiny new smile, he went on over to the coronary unit to have his heart fixed.

George's priorities remind me of a Mark Twain quote, "*Never put off till tomorrow what you can do the day after tomorrow.*" George only put off what may have been a matter of life and death for an hour or so. I wonder, though, how often, and how long, you or I put off the urgent matters of the heart, the '*Follow me*' calling out for our attention and response.

"Lord, I'll follow! But first let me get my teeth cleaned." Or if not that it's shopping, or paying our taxes, or remodeling the kitchen or building the resume or the net worth.

"Follow me." Jesus issues the summons to some eager souls by a Samaritan roadside. And he continues to issue the summons to us.

*"Sign on the line.*

*"Take action.*

*"Follow me.*

*"Now."*

*Amen.*