

Grace to you and peace from God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

"I will follow you, but....." Do you know of a little word in our language which if placed after a statement, becomes the biggest negative word in our language? The word is but, as in, I will follow you, Lord, but—the word but negates all that comes before. Or, I will go with you, but.....don't ask me to do anything that makes me feel uncomfortable. Get the idea. The but is a good way for us to go back on our commitment, our promises, our faithfulness.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus' responses to would-be followers seems a bit harsh but he gets right to the point. He is heading for Jerusalem to die and he is pulling no punches. He gets right down to reality. When one person told Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go.", Jesus said, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus didn't say, "No" He simply told this would-be disciple not to expect a bed of roses. We don't know if the man followed Jesus or not.

Then Jesus invited a man to follow him, but the man said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."—but Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." That has a harsh ring to it, doesn't it? Harsh and heartless! But from what we know of that culture, this man's father was most likely alive. In that time and place people expected the son to take care of his parents until he buried them. This man was probably asking to defer his discipleship until such time as his father died, but Jesus wasn't having any of it. "Let the dead bury their own dead." He replied. Frankly, that still has a harsh ring to it, but it was Jesus' way of telling this man that there was a priority even higher than allegiance to parents. That priority was allegiance to God.

Then another person said, "I will follow you Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." The people who heard Jesus' response would have been reminded of the story of Elijah and Elisha in their scriptures. Those names are confusing, aren't they! Just think of EliJAH as the older man and EliSHA as the younger man. Elijah was a prophet. He called Elisha to follow him. Elisha said that he would do so, but asked permission to say farewell to his parents. Elijah apparently granted that permission.

However, the real point of the story came next. When Elijah called him, Elisha had been plowing with a yoke of oxen. As a way of demonstrating his commitment to the prophet Elijah and his commitment to God—Elisha slaughtered his oxen—burned the wooden yoke—and roasted the oxen over the fire. He then hosted a great feast for his neighbors, who came to eat the roasted oxen. In doing so, Elisha burned his bridges behind him. With no more oxen and no yoke, he

couldn't return to farming. He was throwing in his lot with the prophet Elijah, and he was throwing it in for good.

That's the kind of commitment that Jesus was looking for. He wanted his disciples to have that kind of "no turning back" commitment. Jesus would rather have a few committed disciples than many half-believers.

The kind of commitment that Jesus was looking for was exemplified in a brief prayer by St. Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius prayed:

"Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve; to give and not to count the cost;

To fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labor and not

To ask for reward, save that of knowing that we do your will."

Living our faith is hard work. I like the example of plowing behind the ox. The farmer has to control the plow with one hand and guide the animal with the other. Looking back will cause him to lose sight of the fixed point and to plow a crooked row. The good news is that you get better with practice, but you have to stay focused.

Losing focus is so easy. The world presents so many options and sometimes we feel overwhelmed or unworthy. We make mistakes, we make excuses. We should be slow to condemn those who make excuses. Who among us is perfect? We should remember that some of the giants of the faith first offered excuses before they accepted God's call.

° **Moses** protested, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He argued, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

° **Gideon** pleaded, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family

° **Jeremiah** protested, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

° **Isaiah** said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips..."

° And **Jonah** not only made excuses, he ran in the opposite direction of where God wanted him to go

And yet each of these people, however reluctantly, did what God asked, and God blessed their reluctant discipleship. This is good news, because it means that God does not label us a permanent failure when we sin or protest or offer excuses. We wonder if any of the men in our Gospel lesson dropped their excuses and followed Jesus. What happened if they did?

To the man who made excuses, Jesus said, "Go and proclaim the kingdom of God." That's what he wants us to do. Let us go and proclaim the kingdom of God.

Let us live joyfully in the kingdom of God. .And let us witness each day of our lives to the kingdom of God—so that Jesus can work through us.

Jesus calls us to a committed way of life which places Him first and everything else second. A faithfulness which is reflected in all that we say, in all that we do, in all that we are. Jesus wants us to set our priorities on the most important areas of life. Those are loving the Lord your God with all of your mind, with all of your soul, with all of your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. When this comes first, then everything else will fall into place. This commitment takes dedication, it takes faithfulness, it takes a mind set to follow through. It is not easy, however, in the long run it will be rewarding as you and I spend eternity with the Lord. And in the short run living in this commitment will give meaning and purpose, comfort and strength, guidance and courage as you and I walk the faith journey.

Jesus is calling us to a commitment, no promises of an easy life, no promises of an uneventful walk with him. As we live this committed life, we become a light, a beacon for all those around us to see Christ. A Christian lives in the world , but not of the world. Christians are supposed to be different in this world. Paul says in Galatians, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit." As we commit our lives to Christ, this Spirit allows us to bear the fruit of the Spirit which is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control;".

Jesus calls us to a committed life each day. Not only when it is convenient but when it isn't. Not only when we feel good about our witness, but when it is difficult. We are to live not with excuses, but with a commitment. You and I are to live for Christ and in Christ.

NO BUTS, no excuses --We can say, "I will follow, you, Lord! Amen

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