

June 30, 2019, Anthon UMSC, Lk 9:51-62b, "But First..."
By Pastor Sheryl Ashley

"Bless the Lord O My Soul, O my soul." 10,000 Reasons why to worship His Holy Name... 10,000 reasons why to say "yes" to following the Lord. I love that song and I thank Beau for the gift of it.

But as many reasons as we have for following the Lord, we let a lot of reasons hold us back from doing what God is calling us to do. We've got a lot of "But first let me..." excuses when we want to do something else with our lives, maybe even frivolous stuff.

Such as the lady who was taking her time browsing through everything at a yard sale. You know how addictive they can be. In a conversation with the homeowner, she said, "My husband is going to be very angry when he finds out I stopped at the yard sale."

"I'm sure he'll understand when you tell him about all the bargains," the homeowner replied.

"Normally, yes," the lady said, "But he just broke his leg and he's waiting for me to take him to the hospital to have it set." That's a sick joke, about poor excuses, isn't it? On my last Sunday preaching here, I need a laugh. Pastoring is a heart calling that is very hard to imagine not doing, even though you know it's time for you to hang it up and no excuse is going to save you when God says "Follow me another path. This one is completed for you." You still feel the loss. I love you people, I love this sanctuary, I love preaching from this pulpit. I love my office. And I love working with all of you on projects and missions of every kind. I have even asked God, "Are you sure I'm done here? I waited a long time to come back...like 30 years. It feels like it was meant to be." ...And through a very tired feeling inside, God lets me know, I'm to be done with the call here,

but I thank Him for allowing me to fulfill this dream of coming back for a final go at it. You've got to have that fire in your belly to be a good pastor and when my fire started burning low I knew that I knew that I knew, wanting isn't enough, you've got to be driven by faith to walk the tight rope of ministry...like Nik Wallenda and his sister who were driven to walk their high wire over Times Square on June 23rd after their family took a terrible fall performing some time back. The sister fell on her face and underwent a lot of other repair. And still they felt so called to walk the wire, they risked it again. If anyone had a good excuse, a good reason not to do this again, it was them. But when asked why, they replied over and over, "This is who we are and what we were born to do." They feel this is their calling from God and they were going to do it or die trying. Joel Olsten prayed for them before the walk and they listened to Christian music during the crossing and by the grace of God they made it.

Not everyone is called to that much drama, but when it's time for any of us to say "Yes" to God in whatever our call, we tend to have our perfectly good excuses, our 10,000 reasons and our "But firsts let me..." when we are called to do something new that is a time-consuming commitment for God, or a bit risky, because, we are caught up in a life filled with choices of what to make first in our lives. So often important callings for God are put on the back burner until a more opportune time, when we're less busy,... which is never. I didn't go to seminary until I was in my late 40s and then only in the summers as I had a child still at home and commitments as a church secretary here and dozens of other tasks, I had laid on myself, plus college. But God, ever patient, calls us until we find a way to say, "Yes" and follow him wherever he asks. It is in the saying of that "Yes" that the doors of possibility open for us, and rarely until then. That's

something you learn with age. Something else you learn with age is that no certain number of years or good health or lasting abilities are guaranteed you on this earth, so do what you need to do to follow Jesus with your time, talents, gifts, service, presence, and your witness when he calls, not regretting when strength fails you and the opportunity passes.

You also learn that life has some strange turns that can swing that door shut when you least expect it. I was so stubborn when I got cancer to not let go of this calling, but with your help I toughed it out that second year, and then not wanting a disease to defeat my ministry, I signed on for this third year. I didn't realize the lack of strength I would be working with, but you all have been so helpful in assisting me to do my job well in spite of the problems. Roger and Marilyn providing that stool to sit on preaching and words to cheer me when I arrived here early on Sunday mornings. And Lay Leader Shirley Nelson taking the reigns to preach when I had chemo and even when it was just my Sunday off. Penny Rosso driving me to Annual conference and back and she doesn't even live around here! The list includes you all.

I was so buoyed up by all your prayers and helps that I was not going to let cancer cheat me out of this last year getting to pastor in this beloved church I had the opportunity to help build after the fire 35 years ago, and the church where I got to begin serving first as a Sunday school teacher, Youth leader, Choir member. UMW president, your church secretary and then as a pastor the first time. It was here I got my start in ministry. Watch out! You can work your way up in this place,

In today's Gospel reading this morning we have Jesus, working his way up to the Ascension, but first, obedient to the call of His Father, he sets his face to go to

Jerusalem to die on a cross for our sins. You do the work before the reward of a job well done, thou good and faithful servant is spoken. In his travels he is walking along the road to a Samaritan village where the people did not receive his disciples who went ahead. His disciples, rejected, but feeling their power, asked if they should command fire to come down from heaven and burn those people up. Jesus who never misused his power told them “no way.” They shake the dust off their feet and go on to another village where Jesus encounters three men who recognizes he is someone special, and they ask to follow him and he invites them to do so. The first man enthusiastically replies to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” We’ve all probably felt like that toward God at some time or another. You may have had some mountaintop experiences, maybe some of us once were at some revival, or we were at a church camp or retreat or some other inspiring situation, such as a Lay Witness Mission we had here at Anthon UMC (which affected me), and we felt so close to Jesus that we said in our hearts, “I’ll go wherever you want me to go. I’m yours. Do with me as you will.”

The truth of the matter is that most of us have lived pretty regular lives since any religious experience, and if we don’t keep up the interaction with Jesus, our glow fades away little by little too. There have been plenty of instances where we could have served Christ better; but somehow other things got in the way.

Jesus days are numbered and he has no time for the “Yes, but first let me...” Notice Jesus’ response to this first man who seems to be ready to follow. “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” Jesus seems to be saying to him in a gentle way, “Think about what you’re saying. Following me is not for the faint of heart. It’s not for people who are concerned about material possessions

or comforts. It's for people who are ready to put it all on the line. It's not for people who get excited on one occasion, who respond for an hour to a nice, warm, spiritual feeling. It's for people who are ready to be Christ's man, Christ's woman, Christ's young person, regardless of their current circumstance or how they happen to be feeling at the moment. To offer homelessness or even sacrifice a comfortable life as a reward for those who give their lives to help others get to their eternal home, is not an attractive calling to most folks.

Notice Jesus' encounter with the second man. Jesus says to him, "Follow me."

The man replies, "Yes but first let me go and bury my father."

That seems like a reasonable "but first..." answer. We might wonder what the man's doing spending time talking to Jesus if his father has just died: In the first century, the Jews buried the dead almost immediately, usually the same day. If there was a death, he should have been back home in the first place. Jesus' answer is a little harsh, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God." What's that about? In the middle east when the culture speaks of burying a parent, it's meaning often is that the parent is elderly and they can't leave them yet.

"As long as my Mom and Dad depend on me, "this man is saying, "I better stay home but some day.... We admire that kind of devotion. I'm sure normally God does too, but when Jesus calls you to an urgent task, he is asking you to make him number one now, and it's pretty easy to fail that test when you think of your worldly commitments.

The third man makes a request that sounds just as reasonable, “Yes, I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” Hey, these are nice guys and they want to follow Jesus, but they’ve got responsibilities.

And so they say to him, “Yes, but first...” Jesus is just as short with this man as he is with the others. Jesus says to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” Once you have made your commitment to Jesus, you are not to look back, like the Egyptians looked back at Egypt when being God’s people in the wilderness got tough going. Obviously, Jesus regarded the statement of the first man that he would follow him anywhere as superficial and he regards the second two as mere excuses. Jesus doesn’t need any more half-hearted disciples. He wants people who were ready to make a commitment that will change lives. No doubt when people join our churches Jesus would say that we should be more demanding about their loyalty and their faithfulness to follow Him. We’ve had it so easy we have grown casual about our commitment to Christ and His church but that ease is being taken away from us daily and we don’t even notice it.

If you look at how unpopular being a Christian is becoming these days even in our own country, you will begin to understand what choosing Jesus as Number One means in this Scripture and that there can be no, “Yes, but first let me...” In too many places in this world, the cost of saying, Yes, to Christ can cost you everything. Are we ready for setting our faces toward Jerusalem as was Jesus? Would we even baptize our children as we did little Walter Hill last Sunday if we realized are baptizing them into a “Yes” to Jesus for a lifetime would one day become unpopular and cause them to be persecuted?

When we are tempted to take the easy path, (and life in our culture is full of easy paths) and make excuses for why we can't do this and such, we must remember what our end goal is. That goal is to have a lasting and loving relationship with Jesus, and for all we know it will be costly. This is a serious commitment for when called upon, "Yes but" ...just doesn't cut it in God's eyes.... Jesus gave no excuses for not doing what he was called to do. We all must do our best in our lives and listen for God's next call, even if it causes us some loss to accept it as we move forward to build the kingdom of God in a new way, a new path, Jesus going before us.

Our lives are about to part ways on a new path, not yours from each other, but mine from yours. However, remember that your and my path, if we keep on the path for Jesus, are going to end up at the same place where 1000 years are like a day in the sight of the Lord. Or as the song goes, "10,000 years and then forevermore." We are going to be together one day forevermore because ultimately, we are following the same leader in Jesus Christ and once you start following him, there is no looking back at your old life wondering what you might have missed. Jesus was on His way to the cross and his death and he did not look back but expected those who were called to follow without excuses. We all have 10,000 good sounding reasons for not going some new way God is leading us. I gave none for coming back here.

It's been a miracle to get to come full circle to begin and end in Anthon...not that I'm going to sit quietly or never fill in someplace now and then. I want to keep that calling alive and well, but officially I'm taking my final leave as an appointed pastor. Or could it be that I just love retirement parties so much I keep doing this! But this time I mean it! I do! I'm passing the mantle on to Pastor Jena just as in our first reading from 2 Kings 2,

Elijah went up to heaven and Elisha was called by God to fill the position of prophet and leader next. Elisha was obedient and the power was passed onto him. Not that Jena and I are any high prophets but we have both heard God calling us in the night and answered in our own timing and in our own way. "Here I am Lord!" I have done my best with the gifts God has given me and I trust Jena will do the same with hers. But I have needed your cooperation and commitment and so will she.

As Matt Redman's sings in 10,000 years and then forevermore. "The sun comes up. It's a new day dawning. Time to sing your song again. Whatever may pass, and whatever may befall me, let me be singing when evening comes. **Bless the Lord, oh my soul...Oh my soul, worship his holy name. Sing like never before, oh my soul. worship your holy name.**"

Let this church and all the churches represented here be singing now and until the evening comes. No excuses. I'll be watching and praying for you from near and far. Amen and Amen.