

“Keep Moving Forward”
Sermon
Smyrna United Church of Christ
June 27, 2010

Luke 9:51-62

9:51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. 52 And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; 53 but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. 54 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?" 55 But he turned and rebuked them.

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

I'd like to talk to you today about lines. Yes, lines. There are lines all around us. There's a line that runs from here to that door in the back, and lines between me and each of you, and between you and one another. There are lines that separate property – between the church property and the orchard, between counties, between states. In the orchard next door there are lines of trees, one row after another, straight and methodical lines. We plow lines for planting fields, making straight lines to make the whole process of planting, caring for, and harvesting as efficient as possible. We stand in lines at the store – sometimes a quick line, sometimes a slow one.

In all of these lines, there is a beginning point and an end point. And then, there is the space between. The space between the two points is the tricky part. To have a line, you want to travel through that space as efficiently and directly as possible, not turning aside, or curving around, but going straight from Point A to Point B.

I know from *lots* of experience that that's hard to do. When we have a task, going from a beginning point to an end, it's often hard not to lose focus – in fact, we get distracted pretty easily. We are busy people, surrounded by worldly things competing for our attention. We have technology that is constantly giving us information. We get tired and worn out. Writing a sermon

takes me *way* too long, because I keep getting distracted by other things – checking my email, watching the people around me, thinking about other plans. We have other responsibilities – family, friends, church, that are calling us away to other tasks. It's HARD to stay focused on just one thing at a time.

But I've also learned from experience that there's a method, a secret, to making it work. Two, actually. What are these secrets, you ask? You probably already know them – ***Keep Moving Forward, and never take your eyes off the goal.***

I have to keep learning these two secrets over and over again, because I forget them more often than I should. In each new scenario that they apply to, though – pretty much everything, it seems – the lesson reinforces itself, and it gets a little easier to practice them in new ways. And here, in Luke, Jesus is teaching me one more time about making a line between Point A and Point B, and getting through the space between by the secrets of **Keep Moving Forward, and keep your eyes on the goal.**

As the verses of our text today begin, the first one lays out for us Jesus' Point B, his goal. "When the days drew near from him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus has been set a task. He must go from Galilee to Jerusalem, in order to fulfill his purpose, given to him by God. He told his disciples about it earlier in this Luke chapter, in verse 9:22 – "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." Jesus' task is to be the Messiah, and through this task to usher in the Kingdom of God.

This verse also tells us a little of how Jesus gets there. He "sets his face to go to Jerusalem." What do you imagine when you hear "set his face"? Is it a facial expression? I imagine that Jesus' face is focused and serious, yes, but "set your face" also implies to me a direction – he turns his face to go where he wants to go.

So, in order to achieve our end point, we have to set our face to where we want to go. There are plenty of examples of this in daily life. Let's take driving, for example. When I first started driving, I kept wanting to look out my side window to see the scenes passing by, but pretty soon I realized that if I did that, the car started going over the white lines to the rough patches that let

you know you were off the road. And in Portland, I'm learning about driving with bicyclists and pedestrians around. I overheard a conversation just the other day at a coffee shop. A man was complaining to his friend about a driver who had almost run him over – the person in the car was turning onto a one way road, and only looked the way that the cars would have been coming from. He was still looking that direction when she started turning, and never turned his head to where he was going to see if any pedestrians or bicyclists were there. When you're turning in a car, you have to look where you are going in order to get there safely. I've also learned about setting my face where I want to go in horseback riding and piano lessons, and even hiking. In horseback riding, one of the first things I learned as a little girl was to look where I wanted to go. If I wanted the horse to turn easily and smoothly, all I had to do was turn my head to look where I wanted to end up. If I put my eyes on something else, the horse moved towards that other thing. I had to keep my eyes ahead in order to give the horse the message "Go there, that's our goal, that's where we need to be. Keep moving forward." In piano and hiking, it's more about keeping your eyes a step ahead than on the last step. If you don't look ahead, you stop moving. In order to keep going, you *have* to look at the next step even while you're finishing the last.

If we aren't focused on our goal, our lines, our rows, get wobbly, we lost momentum, and we get off track.

In the rest of the Scripture passage, we learn what it takes to have a goal and stick to it.

As Jesus is going towards Jerusalem, there is a setback – a village of Samaritans will not welcome Jesus, because of his purpose, his goal. Instead of letting this setback distract him, though, as it does his disciples who want to bring fire down on it and destroy it, Jesus stays focused on the kingdom of God and his calling, rebukes his disciples, and keeps going. Farther down the road, other disciples offer to join him, and he calls one to follow him. Through the first one, we learn that staying focused on the path and the end point requires sacrifice – those who stay in place, like foxes in their holes, birds in their nests, and people in their comfortable beds, don't make it to the goal, to the end of the line. Journeying along the path, between Point A and Point B, requires discomfort and sacrifice. Through the second would-be disciple, we learn that there are tasks for specific people, and we must follow that to which we are called. When Jesus

says “Follow me,” our task is to set our eyes on that calling, and let others do the tasks to which they have been called.

Finally, with the last disciple, we have a direct statement of the direct to *keep moving forward and never take your eyes off the goal*. The translation we read reads, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Another translator adds in some of the tenses and implications of the Greek text – “No one who puts a hand to the plow and **keeps** looking back is fit **to proclaim** the kingdom of God.” Adding that “keeps” in there gives it another sense – one that says “I’m not committed.” If you *keep* looking back, even if it’s to make sure that your rows are straight, or take pride in what you’ve done already, the lines in front of you, while you’re looking back, start to get wobbly. To direct the horse, or mule, or donkey, or ox, whatever they used to plow a field, you have to use body language and stay constantly at attention to make the line straight, to redirect the animal if it starts going astray. Same with a car, or a bike – to move forward in a straight line, your eyes have to stay ahead, focused on where you want to go.

The next question, then, is – where do you want to go? Where is your end goal, your Point B on the line? What are you focused on, committed to?

Sometimes, I think that our line is wobbly because our Point B is a little fuzzy. We’re not exactly sure where we’re supposed to be, so our lines our more like zigzags or curly-cues. Sometimes we’re moving forward, but sometimes we stop in place, or move backwards, or sideways. Sometimes it feels like we’ve taken a wrong turn, or even that we’ve been given wrong directions. I studied abroad in New Zealand in college, and during a short break from classes I took advantage of a farming program and worked on an organic farm for a few days in exchange for food and a bed. They had sheep and cattle, and one of the jobs that I helped with was moving their electric fence poles another yard to two out to allow them to eat more grass. In order to move the pole at my end to the right place, I had to line it up with a fence post at the other end. Now there were a lot of fence posts at the other end, and it was hard to tell which one I wanted to line up with. I thought that I had the right one, then when I walked the line up to it I realized that I had gotten off – my eyes and the distance between had tricked me. So, to line up with the right

fence post, I had to put a marker on it (a hat worked really well). After I had marked it, and knew exactly where I wanted to go, drawing a straight line was easy.

What are you focused on, and what fence post are you moving toward? Is your line straight, or are you taking a round-about way?

Thinking about this can be applied to many different scenarios – family, job, etc., but for today, think about it in terms of your journey as a Christian. What should our focus, our Point B, end goal be as Christians? I want to suggest that at least one goal is the one that Jesus gives two of the disciples in the passage – **proclaiming the Kingdom of God**. How do we do this in today's world? Some of us might pick up everything and physically go to proclaim, but most of us don't, and don't need to. We do what we are called to do, and each of us is called. Perhaps it is a one-time calling of talking to a person in need. Of having an open mind and heart. Each of you has a life and interactions that no one else has, and through those things are you called to witness to the Kingdom of God – to God's love. It means loving other people, and not judging them and pushing them away. It means being open and responsible with the resources and talents that God has given you. It means identifying need and doing something about it.

In this passage, we take lessons from Jesus about how to follow Jesus to the end goal of proclaiming God's reign.

- 1) Listen to Jesus
- 2) Remember the overarching theme – love and forgiveness
- 3) Remember that sometimes sacrifice is involved
- 4) Follow Jesus whatever the cost
- 5) Remember what you have learned in the past while not second-guessing, being too prideful
- 6) Keep Moving Forward – eyes straight ahead to the steps right in front of you and the goal at the end

What kind of disciple are you? When you say, Jesus, I want to follow you, do you then qualify it with “Let me do this first”? Are you committed to proclaiming the Kingdom of God, or do you keep looking back? **Keep moving forward, and never take your eyes off the goal.** Amen.