

“You Can’t Go Home Again”

Let us pray: Dear Lord, deliver us from the presumption of thinking that we already know you fully and follow you completely. Instead, call us into new places and give us the courage to go there with you. Amen.

- I. **Introduction: You Can’t Go Home Again!** Isn’t it ironic that so many of us couldn’t wait to leave home and go out on our own, and then after we were independent for a while, wanted to go home again? But going back home to the place where we’ve grown up is a complex business. In fact Thomas Wolfe wrote a book entitled *You Can’t Go Home Again*. I suppose what he meant was that we really can’t recreate or duplicate the experiences of our past. As time has evolved, the world we grew up in has changed and, equally important, we have changed as well. As an adult, when I went back to the city and the house in which I’d grown up, I was astounded by how the trees and buildings had dramatically shrunk in size. Many of the faces that I remembered seeing around me as a child and a teenager weren’t there anymore. New faces had taken their place. In some ways it was a big shock!

- II. **Jesus Says It Too: You Can’t Go Home Again.** Three wannabe disciples approached Jesus while he was traveling through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem. What happened on this journey is absolutely key to understanding what Luke is trying to tell us. The last two of these wannabe disciples came to Jesus with conditions. I want to follow you, but I need to go bury my father first. The second, I too want to follow you, but I need to go home and say goodbye to my family. Reasonable requests on the face of it. But Jesus, it would appear, very immediately and very directly told them NO. If you really want to follow me, do it now. No looking back. You can’t go home again.

Here’s how I make sense of what Jesus was saying. Discipleship requires our full commitment and our full attention. Jesus used the Palestinian plow to illustrate. The plow of Jesus’ day required two hands to work properly – one to direct the plow and the other to steer the oxen pulling the plow. Unless one looked forward, the plow might well hit something and go off track. Plowing took your full attention, just as being a disciple takes one’s full attention. We can kind of hang out with Jesus, without really following Him. But then we remain at best wannabes; we are not really disciples.

Jesus was giving his potential disciples a warning. He said “Discipleship is phenomenal, it will literally change your life. If you follow me, you will have adventures you cannot even imagine, and you will change deeply because the way you see things will be forever changed. I, Jesus Christ, will be the center of your life. You’ll see the needs of others more clearly and you’ll want less for yourself. Nothing else can come even close to following me. But also, know this. We’re headed to Jerusalem – even now. You will each be asked to pick up your particular cross and follow me. And while we’re traveling together, you and I are going to know hardship. In fact, we’re not even going to have a place to sleep some nights. We’re going to be homeless.”

III. Here Is Our Choice. Are we real followers of Jesus Christ or are we wannabe disciples? I hope our choice is unequivocally full-fledged discipleship. This week six of us from Ascension participated in the Renewal Conference at Kanuga Conference Center in North Carolina. The theme of the conference was “The Power of the Holy Spirit in an Age of Weakness: Renewing the Church Today.” The conference keynoter was Former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey and the Chaplain, who also spoke to us daily, was the Reverend Alan Hansen, President of ACTS 29 Ministries based in Atlanta, GA. The conference was dynamic and inspiring. Throughout the week the central theme was how to claim the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our churches. The power of the Spirit is described in our reading from Galatians as a powerful force that takes us into a place of great freedom. Our Galatians reading today concludes with the admonition: If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The speakers last week often emphasized how the Holy Spirit is prepared to help us do what Jesus asks us to do: To follow him in a disciplined way, to be prepared to make sacrifices, and to surrender ourselves and submit our wills to his. The Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, is prepared to walk next to us as our champion and advocate in this process. And we certainly need the Spirit’s help. What Jesus calls us to do has a cost.

The speakers also observed that many Christians and many Christian churches in the West have become lukewarm in their commitment to Christ. They have become like the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation – neither hot nor cold in their faith, having lost the fervor of their first love for Christ. For many Christians in the West our faith has become somewhat comfortable, casual, and convenient. The problem with such a faith is that it can be compromised. In some parts of the world, Christians are under great pressure to cave in and abandon their faith. The Archbishop told us about some of the challenges Christians face in other parts of the world – a woman in Malaysia who has become a Christian and is being denied the

right to marry another Christian become she was born in another religion. Or a bishop in Africa whose home was burned down and family severely beaten as he was making an Episcopal visitation. The stories go on and on. For them it is just as Jesus said . . . those who follow him will pay a price.

Let me tell you a brief story that illustrates these ideas. A group of Christians formed a church in a very poor country elsewhere in the world. Their government was hostile to Christians and tried to discourage them in many ways, including active discrimination and violence against them. One Sunday, the community was gathered together in worship, the service had already started, and they suddenly heard the sound of many trucks driving up to the building. Then they heard truck doors closing and orders being given to take possession of the church. Quickly soldiers entered the sanctuary, surrounded the congregation along the inside wall, and pointed their guns at them. The commander screamed: "You are breaking the law, disband immediately. This is your last chance. Leave now or be shot." A good proportion of the congregation got up and left. Others stayed. The soldiers shut all the doors and windows tightly and those who remained were afraid they were going to be killed. After the doors and windows were all closed, the soldiers took off their hats and the commander said, "Continue. We have come to worship with you, but had to be sure who we could trust." The million dollar question for each of us this morning is what would we have done in their place?

- IV. Conclusion: Choosing to Become a Disciple. In a youth meeting I once helped lead, we discussed the movie *The Matrix*. The hero of this film was offered a critically important choice between two powerful, differently colored pills. One would anesthetize him. He would forget all that he had seen about the evil matrix and would go on living his confused existence. The other pill would help him to remember and to understand the full painful truth. But the truth would carry its own burden. He would not be able to remain inactive, sitting on the sidelines any longer. Instead he would have to act – to fight for what is good and holy and to make major sacrifices. There was really no middle ground.

If we choose to follow Christ fully as disciples, we too will be called to action and to sacrifice. I can assure you that we will have incredible experiences with Jesus Christ and with each other. But we are going to have to be clear, there is no looking back and there is no turning back. We all will have to keep both hands on the plow in order to move forward. I believe we at Ascension are being called to strengthen our ministries within and beyond the parish. In particular, we look for an expanded and more dynamic Christian Formation program, an exciting youth ministry, new efforts in evangelism, and building a Stephen Ministry program. As we continue our current ministries and expand beyond them, we can count on being faced with chal-

lenges. We will receive direction and resources when we need them. But Jesus tells us that we will not be able to return to our old home again. Both the present and the future will differ from the past. The choice is ours: disciples or wannabees, no middle ground. Where do we stand?