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Series: Give Up!
Sermon: Give Up the Past

Luke 9:57-62 (NIV)

As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the service in the Kingdom of God."

Sermon

The last time I was back in my home town, I ran into Tina. Tina was a neighbor to my grandmother, and currently visits my 94 year old grandmother each day in her home and helps prepare her food. We are blessed to have Tina help out grandma. So when I saw Tina, she replied. Hi Mikey. Now, Mikey is not a name I've gone by in many many years. Like ever. Only a few people call me Mikey - And all of them, at one time, had changed my baby diapers. Here's a rule in life you'll never escape - and its called the powdered-butt syndrome. Once you've powdered someone's rear, you will never take them seriously. Its true. I have a college degree, two masters degrees. Wife, children, money in retirement, a good job. I go back there - and I'm Mikey (pat on the head). Maybe one reason we moved 1,700 miles away is to start fresh. People have done that, tried to move away to distance themselves from their past, but the saying is also true, wherever you go, there you are. Some of us carry the joys and successes of our past into the future, and find self-worth because of our trophies, our cash, our accomplishments. Some of us carry the heartache and pains of our past into our future, and find self-loathing because of the abuse, or failures, or mistakes. Both are unhealthy.

In seasons of Lent, a common practice for folk is to give up certain pleasures of life to recenter themselves on spiritual matters. Some people give up coffee, others chocolate or other types of food. Some start a spiritual practice - its all very personal. So, in that Spirit, we are starting a new sermon series we're calling, "Give Up!" Just give up already! Sounds fatalistic, until you discover what I want us to give up for these 40 days and nights. Today, I want to tell you to give up your past. Give up your past.

Today's scripture has Jesus telling a few disciples to give up their past. And these are some of the harshest words that Jesus shared. Love your enemies. OK, I don't want to, but I get it. Go ye therefore into all the world?, Seems like a lot of work, but I get it. Let the dead bury their own dead? Hold on. What? Jesus, I want to follow you, but let me go and bury my Father. And the kind, compassionate, always loving and always graceful Jesus says, "NO!" Let the dead worry about themselves. And if you're like me, you have this about face and you think to yourself, "Is this really the Jesus that I want to follow?" Just let the guy go and bury his father. No big deal. Seems like a reasonable request. Most of us get some form of bereavement leave from our

jobs, stated or unstated, why shouldn't the disciples also have that in their benefit package? Is Jesus really that freaked out if the guy went home for a few days?

For years, I thought what this scripture was really addressing was that the Disciple's father wasn't actually dead yet. Let me go home and care for good ol' pa, and then someday, when he's gone, I'll come and follow you. But that sounds like a good excuse as well. Mom, dad, I know you're in the nursing home or the care facility, or wherever - but there's this guy out in the desert preaching and I'm going to follow him for a while. Good luck, take your meds, and I'll see you in a few years. That doesn't sound quite right either. Jewish law and tradition had that kids should care for their parents in their old age. The whole commandment "Honor your father and your mother" wasn't made for kids to respect their parents, but it was made for adults not to abandon their folks when it got hard and inconvenient. Some of you are caring for your parents right now in such a way. God bless you. You might feel trapped, or handcuffed. I encourage you to also care for yourself. Find time away. Maybe your parent is really good at guilt trips, they make you feel guilty for wanting to have a little bit of your own life. I'll be fine, don't worry about me, I'm just your mother who raised you and gave you life, you go on ahead, don't worry about little ol' me. Travel agent for guilt trips. Don't do that - you can still love your parent/grandparent, and still have a life. It takes strong boundaries though. If this was the scenario that this particular disciple faced, Jesus' words make a little more sense. Do you want to follow me or not? We're not going to wait ten years for you. It's now or never. That's the scenario I used to think this story was about - until I learned about first century Jewish Burial customs.

Am I right? You've read about first-century Jewish Burial customs, who hasn't, right? But just in case you missed that barn-burner of a book "First Century Jewish Burial Customs for Dummies", here's the deal: After a death, the body was placed in a burial cave, a tomb, and it was left to decompose. This was not going to be its final resting place. The family would officially mourn for seven days. The cloth, the ash, not going out, the whole bit. This initial mourning period was followed by a less intense 30-day period of mourning, called shloshim. During shloshim, a mourner (any member of the family) is forbidden to marry or to attend any religious festival. So if you're getting married and granny passed away, you're putting it off. Men do not shave or get haircuts during this time. However, the entire mourning period was not fully over until the flesh of the deceased had decomposed, usually about a year later. The Jerusalem Talmud states: When the flesh had wasted away, the bones were collected and placed in chests (ossuaries). On that day sons shall mourn, but the following day, he shall be glad because his forebears rested from judgment. The final act of mourning, the gathering of the bones into a bone box called an ossuary, or secondary burial. It is this act, I believe, that is in view in our Lord's response that makes sense for the disciples discussion. The disciples' request and Jesus' response makes good sense in light of the Jewish custom of secondary burial. When the disciples requested time to bury their fathers they were actually asking for time to finish the rite of secondary burial. I need a year to finish this. Jesus' sharp answer also fits well with secondary burial. The fathers had been buried in the family burial caves and their bodies were slowly decomposing. In the tombs, along with the fathers, were other family members who had died, some awaiting secondary burial, others already placed in ossuaries. When Jesus stated: "Let the dead bury their own dead", he was referring to two different kinds of dead in the tomb: the bones of the deceased which had already been neatly placed in ossuaries and the loved ones who had yet to be reburied. The way the Disciple asked the question tells me that father has already passed, and is now just lying in a tomb waiting. The disciple is hamstrung by the past, just waiting around.

The concept of gathering the bones of one's ancestors is deeply embedded in the Hebrew Scriptures and reflected in Israelite burial practices. However, by New Testament times, the concept had taken on a new meaning. According to the Rabbinic sources, the decomposition of the flesh atoned for the sins of the dead person (a kind of purgatory) and the final stage of this process was gathering the bones and placing them in an ossuary. Jesus confronts this contrary theology. Only faith in Christ's redemptive work on the cross can atone for sin, not rotting flesh or any other work or merit of our own. Jesus may have rebuked the disciple rather harshly because they were following the corrupted practice of secondary burial. Purgatory, by the way, is not in

our tradition. Jesus is saying to the Disciple, this is your moment. Don't let the past dictate your present. Don't follow the dead - I give life. Looking backwards is looking at what was. Its gone. Its dead. Looking forward is looking at what could be. It's coming. It's life.

What does this have to do with us giving up the past?

Let me ask it like this: Do you ever feel like a victim? Whether it be an abusive household, past mistakes, grief, loss, life's circumstances, or just bad luck that followed you around? You might have be a victim. Locked in that metaphoric prison cell. Trapped - and you had no power or hope of escape. That was then. Are you a victim now? That prison cell opened up, you became free to be yourself, to be anything and everything you wanted to be. But you kept the prison cells with you. And you've carried it your whole life. And it haunts you, and it pains you. If you have no idea what I'm talking about, consider yourself blessed. There are hurting people in here who carry with them a part of their past they would love to escape, but can never fully outrun. But let me tell you something. Jesus' words still ring true. Let the dead bury the dead. Let the past stay in the past. The story of your past doesn't have to become the story of your life! Give it up! If you cling to the past hurts and use them as an excuse for not moving into the future - your future is going to look a whole lot like your past. Say to yourself, This is what happened to me. It does not define me. This is my past. It's not going to be my future. Helen Keller said something like, when one door closes, another one opens. But if you're too busy looking at the closed door, you'll never see the open one. If you're too busy to looking at closed doors, at past relationships, at past mistakes, at past regrets - you won't see what's right in front of you. If you choose the path of resentment or jealousy or what-ifs, if you hold onto the poisonous thoughts like hate, anger - guess what, that's poison you're taking that will kill your happiness and joy. Your worth is not based in what has happened to you, or what you haven't done, or your mess ups and follies. You are richer than that! Jesus died on a cross for you. That's how much you're worth. You are valuable and you are loved. Give up the past.

But what if you're a happy person, who has a lot to celebrate? You have the successes that the world treasures. You have treasures and a charmed life. Guess what? You're not off the hook either. As much as I want to be this kind of blessed person, we also need to give up the past. What's that phrase that investments use, "Past performance does not guarantee future returns"? Jesus has hard words to us as well. Sell all you have, give to the poor, and follow me. Your worth is not based in your accolades, or your degrees, or your occupation, or what you have in your house, or how big your house may be. You are richer than that! Jesus died on a cross for you. That's how much you're worth. You are valuable and you are loved. Give up the past.

Be thankful for your past, the good and the bad. The bad that taught you how you don't want to live your life. The good that taught us appreciation and gratitude. For the moment that you can give up your past, you can live in the present and create your future - one filled with life. Take it from me. Mikey. And the family of God said, Amen.