

No Looking Back
By Josette Keelor

I love the image on today's bulletin cover with its accompanying quote.

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Looking at the image, I imagine someone with a plow going along trying to carve a straight line but then looking back when someone calls to them and inadvertently veering off to the right.

If you've ever used a lawnmower, you might have had a similar experience of getting to the edge of your property and realizing you've been mowing slightly diagonally this whole time.

It's easy to see from this cover image how looking back can be a detriment and that it's important to keep our eyes ahead of us to make sure we're on the right path and also walking—or plowing—that path properly.

But the words that Jesus tells his would-be followers to illustrate that point in today's third reading feel kind of harsh.

One man says he'll follow Jesus but first he wants to bury his father, and Jesus answers by telling him to let the dead bury their dead.

Besides it not being physically possible for dead people to bury other dead people, it can come off to us modern readers as pretty insensitive. The man's father just died, and, perhaps because he has nothing else tying him to this area now, he decides to drop everything and follow Jesus. All he asks is that he first hold a funeral. We might wonder what's wrong with that. But knowing how Jesus has a way with words, we can assume that He probably isn't speaking as literally as it sounds.

"Let the dead bury their own dead," he tells the man.

Disregarding the literal, Jesus could be telling the man that since he's among the enlightened now, willing to drop everything and follow Jesus, he no longer belongs among the unenlightened, or "the dead."

Looking back at our cover image of the plowing job gone awry, we can also guess that he's telling the man not to waste time looking back at the past when it's the future that matters now.

“[A]s for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God,” Jesus tells the man, which, as we learn later in this reading, is a calling that’s only available to those who refuse to look behind them but instead keep their eyes focused on their work.

I’m reminded of Lot’s wife from the Old Testament who couldn’t resist looking back over her shoulder at her city being destroyed after two angels of God told her not to and, for her disobedience, was turned into a pillar of salt.

Jesus tells another interested follower not to return home to say goodbye to his friends. This is where we get the words about staying the course while plowing.

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

And isn’t this still true today?

Again, disregarding the literal, we all have times when we might have trouble resisting looking to the past for answers or closure rather than looking ahead to where God would have us go next.

How often do you hear people talk about wanting to return to a time that they see as simpler or kinder than the times we’re living in now?

During the pandemic, how often did you hear people say they wanted to get back to how things were before?

Maybe you’ve said it yourself. Or maybe someone close to you has.

But while we’re all looking back at the before times, what are we doing to appreciate what God has planned for us?

The idea of saying goodbye to old friends before launching on a necessary change reminds me of the Facebook posts I sometimes see from people planning a break from social media. Rather than just take that necessary break, for whatever reason they feel they must alert their social media buddies that they’re going away.

Of course, the man in the story is going on a different type of journey than people who take month or two off from Facebook. Maybe he has a business that people will wonder about if he just closes up shop; or maybe he has family who will fear for his safety if he suddenly disappears.

But that makes the Facebook break warning posts even sillier by comparison. True friends and family would know how to get ahold of that person outside of Facebook to ask if they’re OK; and the friends who have no other way of getting ahold of them probably aren’t real-life friends.

Anyway, if you've ever gone days or weeks or even months without posting, you probably know that no one noticed. Returning to say goodbye usually serves our own interests more than it serves those we love. It's our way of getting closure from the past instead of trusting our choices and looking with faith toward the future.

Which brings us back to the reading.

Jesus is welcoming people who all seem to have things to accomplish before they're ready to follow him.

Using the funeral of the one man's father and the farewells to the other man's friends as metaphors instead of literal, reasonable requests, we could start to imagine all sorts of tasks that we might put between our apparent desire to follow Jesus and our willingness to actually do so.

The examples from today's reading both hint at the idea that we put our loved ones on earth ahead of our father in Heaven, and that's probably a very real barrier that people today feel when they consider how much they want to follow Jesus if it would put them at odds with their family or friends.

In this reading, Jesus also warns his would-be followers to be careful what causes we take upon ourselves and not to claim to be ready to follow Jesus if we aren't, because we'll only be deluding ourselves.

"No one who puts his hand to the plow but then looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Yes, Jesus wants attentive people who will keep their eyes on their work, but He also wants people who aren't just "saying" they'll follow Him while failing to understand what it *means* to follow Jesus. Don't talk the talk; walk the walk.

If you put your hand to that plow but spend your time looking back, then not only won't you be *effective* at demonstrating God's will; you also won't be a reliable follower.

For how can we spread the good news about God if we're not even paying attention to where we're going and what we're doing?

Imagine that plowman off on his own in a sea of wheat or corn. He can't see Jesus anymore and, even if he can figure out how to turn his plow around and head back in the right direction, he'll still have a long journey all alone.

Furthermore, veering away from the path on which Jesus is leading us can put us in terrible danger from the wrong influences.

We might get lost. We might go the wrong way and stumble into someone else's cornfield. We might break down and lose the ability to plow any more pathways forward. Or we might end up following someone we shouldn't.

Perhaps the biggest problem with looking back instead of keeping our eyes on Jesus is that it betrays our distrust in what God has in mind for us. By looking back, we can revisit things we've already done and draw inspiration from those things rather than allowing God to inspire us.

Looking back gives us a sense of security, which makes it difficult for us to change. It also makes it difficult for us to have faith.

Jesus would tell us to trust that God has our backs, but looking behind us is really our foolish attempt to have our own backs.

So, knowing all this, what can we do to apply this to our lives? Because surely it's good to remember the past so we don't repeat the same mistakes of the past.

I don't think that Jesus is telling his disciples to forget where they came from or to stop loving those who matter to them.

I think he's saying that the past is deceptive in its guise of security, certainty, and clarity. Knowing what has happened will not necessarily prepare us for what is yet to come. Besides, there's nothing we can do about the past because it's already written.

I always come back to the words of the Serenity Prayer:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

Wherever you are in your life, look forward to the future and what God has planned. We are at a point of no return. There is no looking back.