

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

FOLLOWING JESUS

Luke 9:51-62; Proper 8C-Pentecost 3C; June 28-29, 2025

I don't watch much TV anymore, but for a while I got interested in watching "Texas no limit hold em" poker. Those watching on TV can see what a player has in his or her hand (something the rest of the players don't know). What fascinated me – at least for a while – was how different players would bet on their hands. Poker players will bet on good hands, or bluff, trying to convince their opponents that they have something they don't. While one player bets, the others watch carefully for "tells," indications whether it is a bluff or a strong hand. The expression "poker faced" means hiding what you are thinking by keeping your face expressionless. When players bet all they have on one hand it's called "going all in." If they win, they double what they have; if they lose, they are out of the tournament.

When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem.

In poker terms, that Jesus "set His face" meant He was "all in" for going to Jerusalem where He would suffer, die on the cross, and rise from the dead. Jesus was "all in," body and soul, holding back nothing for us and for our salvation. This was no bluff with the possibility of His opponents folding on Him. His bet was a "sure thing," though not to win money, but to lose His life. Jesus wasn't bluffing. Nor did He have on a "poker face," concealing anything from His disciples. His "set face" was an "open book." Jesus was determined to get the job done. Folding His hand and giving up was not an option.

This verse is a turning point in Luke's Gospel. Before this, Jesus had foretold His suffering, death, and resurrection and called His disciples to deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow Him. He had taken three of them up to the Mount of Transfiguration where He showed them a glimpse of His heavenly glory. There Jesus spoke with Moses and Elijah about His approaching departure, His "exodus" to Jerusalem and the cross. Jesus's Father had declared Him His chosen Son, and told those disciples to listen to Him and follow where He led them. Now, Jesus was "all in" on His exodus, holding back nothing He had with His face set.

Are you “all in” with Jesus setting His face toward Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise? Not everyone is. In the Gospel text there are examples of those fully opposed to Jesus, the Samaritans along the way, or those who wanted to “hedge their bets,” that is, who were willing to risk some of what they had but not everything.

The Samaritans rejected Jesus’ messengers sent to prepare His way **“because His face was set toward Jerusalem.”** Who were these Samaritans? They were the descendants of the Gentiles the Assyrians populated the land of the Northern Kingdom of Israel after they conquered it and deported most of the Jewish inhabitants to the far reaches of their empire. These Gentiles intermarried with Jews left behind. Their descendants were the Samaritans.

Some Samaritans worshipped false gods like their ancestors, and others said they worshiped the God of the Jews, but did not think it was necessary to worship in Jerusalem, especially for the yearly Passover. Their Jewish ancestors had rejected the descendants of David as their kings; Jesus, the Son of David, was on His way to Jerusalem to be crowned king. They wanted nothing to do with Him.

Who today has similarities to the Samaritans? Anyone who follows a religion other than Christianity certainly would fit. They reject the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as the only true God. These people are offended by Jesus’ claim that faith in Him is the only way to be saved. **“I AM the Way the Truth and the Life; no comes to the Father except through Me”** (Jn 14:6). The fastest growing religion in America today includes those who to claim no religion at all, often described as the “nones,” They reject Jesus’ claim to be the true God since, according to them, there is no god. In their opinion, there is no such thing as absolute truth.

More insidious than “nones” are liberal denominations that teach Jesus as one of many ways to God, but not the only Way. They say “wishy-washy” things like, “The Christian religion contains truth, but other religions have god’s truth, and there are many ways to god, who has many names.” I am sure that there are Christians remaining in those liberal churches who still believe in the one, true God and Jesus Christ as their only Savior, but the churches they belong to are no longer Christian and they should abandon them to follow Jesus.

The second half of the text deals with people who say they want to follow Jesus, but only with conditions they set. Some of them didn't understand that Jesus was on His way to suffer and die. Others said they wanted to follow Jesus wherever He went, but only under conditions, the "I will follow You, but..." group.

Jesus addressed those who had no clue what it meant for Him to **"set His face to go to Jerusalem"** to suffer, die, and rise: **As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow you wherever you go." 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."** When Jesus died, He had no place of His own to be buried, so Joseph of Arimathea buried Him in his own tomb. **"The Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."**

The Christian faith is not just another philosophy in life that we choose to follow. It is following Jesus to the cross and grave, to die with Him and rise with Him. It is accepting in faith that our lives will be like His. **"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it"** (9:23-24), as Jesus said earlier in the same chapter. The cross is Jesus being "all in" for us. The cross is us "all in" for Jesus.

Others "hedge their bets" when it comes to Jesus. They want to follow Jesus on their own terms, the "I will follow You, but" folks. **To another [Jesus] said, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."**

There is a real temptation to put off living by faith as Christians. It's easier to live like people of the world, to have their priorities, to think and behave like they do, to chase after what the world says is most important, to "go with the flow" rather than "swim against the current." We have good intentions to do what we know is right, but other things get in the way. "I will follow you, Jesus, but not yet."

Jesus is clear what He means when He says to us, “**Follow Me.**” We know where He was going: to the cross, grave, and empty tomb to purchase and win us from sin, death, and the power of the devil and make us God’s children by faith in Him alone. Jesus went “all in” for us. The devil called Jesus’ bluff in this because it looked like Jesus had a losing hand dying on the cross. But Jesus rose from the dead to win the victory for all of us. When we follow Jesus, we know where we are going, to His cross to repent of our sin and trust in His forgiveness and the life He gives us.

We know when to do follow Jesus: now, not later. There is nothing more important in this life than being with Jesus now. Putting this off until later comes with Jesus’ warning, “**No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.**” When we stand before the judgment seat of God, the excuse, “I was planning to follow you, but You came for me before I was ready,” will be rejected as no faith at all. Now is the time to follow Jesus in faith, not later.

We know how to follow now: **proclaiming the kingdom of God.** If we are not coming here to God’s house as we are able, not just whenever we feel like it, we are putting our salvation at risk. If we don’t proclaim God’s kingdom in worship with other Christians, we are effectively denying faith in Jesus and the Holy Spirit, who gathers the Church around the Word and sacraments of Jesus. There is no mystery about how we are to follow Jesus.

We know to what extent we follow Jesus. We are “all in” for Jesus. We don’t “hedge our bets” or put off following Him for the sake of getting what this world offers us. Jesus went “all in” for us to win the victory on the cross so we can live forever with Him. The world can take everything we have in this life, but it can’t take that victory from us when we are “all in” by faith in Jesus. We sang our faith a little while ago (*LSB 688:5*).

*Then let us follow Christ, our Lord,
And take the cross appointed
And, firmly clinging to His Word,
In suffering be undaunted.
For those who bear the battle’s strain
The crown of heav’nly life obtain. Amen.*