

Don't Look Back

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Luke 9:51-62

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In an opinion piece in the New York Times entitled 'Moral Bucket List,' columnist David Brooks makes the case that our younger immature self-pursued life primarily in terms of building the resume, pursuing success, and advancing our career, and that the second act of our lives should be spent building our eulogy and pursuing depth of character, meaningful relationships, and generosity of spirit.¹ To simplify further, first half of life, we build the resume' and the second half of life we build the eulogy. Interestingly, enough, while there are some lessons to be learned from such an approach and certainly such a mindset is focused and productive, I think Jesus would have a problem with such an approach. It is still far too focused on the self. In his own way of life and ministry, we see here in Luke that Jesus offers us a more radical and demanding alternative than a life of resume building or eulogy building.

Our passage begins with Jesus making no mistake about where his life is headed and that things will come to a head in Jerusalem even as he sets his face precisely in that direction. Interestingly, commentator Robert Farrar Capon calls our passage the 'prologue' to the Good Samaritan story, the story of an outsider who becomes the source of salvation to a broken and wounded humanity. There are Samaritans in our passage today as well, but far from welcoming Jesus with open arms, Luke tells us on his way to Jerusalem, that the Samaritan community did not receive him. The irony is not lost on Robert Capon who reminds us that Jesus, 'having already been rejected by Jewish authorities because he associated with outcasts (including Samaritans), is now rejected by the very outcasts for whom he jeopardized his respectability in the first place.'² This kind of rejection, at least to me, does not seem to be classified as resume-building or eulogy-building on Jesus' ledger, but starkly reveals a willingness on Jesus' part to be rejected by the very people he went out on a limb for. Perhaps James and John share our sentiments and our thirst for revenge as well when they ask Jesus if they should command 'fire to come down from heaven and consume them.' Translation: don't they know who they are rejecting, the very guy who was declared suspect for spending time with people like them in the first place. And now they are rejecting him? Time to settle scores, enact revenge, preserve some dignity and show these despoiled Samaritans who

¹ David Brooks, 'The Moral Bucket List,' New York Times, April 11, 2015.

² Robert Farrar Capon, 'Losing As Winning,' *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgement: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 203.

they are messing with in the first place. All Luke tells us is that Jesus rebuked the disciples, but if you read the alternative addition by other ancient authorities at the bottom of the page, it offers that Jesus not only rebuked his disciples but said this: 'You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.' That is Jesus' response in the face of betrayal and rejection...the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings.

I think that is generally not the kind of Messiah we want...I think we want a Messiah that is more like the one James and John ask for, a Messiah who is going to be on the same page of our political agenda and have the same enemies we do, a Messiah who is going to command fire to come down from heaven and consume all the people who we feel deserve such condemnation, a Messiah who is going to settle scores, sock it to all the people who had it coming to them, and a Messiah who is going to help us save ourselves by keeping score on others. 'The Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.' That may be the most important and haunting piece of news we ever hear, the most important ingredients we are given to make sense of our lives, and the most powerful lens with which we are graced in order to truly see other people, none of whom exist for divine destruction, but to be redeemed by Jesus Christ. To paraphrase theologian Karl Barth, we can only look at the strangers, aliens, and enemies of today, as brothers and sisters of tomorrow. Jesus is able to see the very outcasts that he embraced and who reject him as those who remain in deep need of his redemption. Even their rejection of him does not merit or change his willingness or ability to see them as human beings meant for redemption. 'For the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.'

This is a realm far beyond the narrow project of resume-building and eulogy-constructing. This is someone who is willing to see the dignity in every human life even when those lives are seen and marked as less than by other segments of humanity and even when the very people Jesus embraces end up rejecting him. Jesus has every opportunity to turn the tables on the Samaritans, a rejected people he embraces who do not reciprocate in kind, and he refuses to see them as anything other than human beings he will only exalt, never destroy. Robert Capon reminds us that it is not just the Samaritans who dismiss Jesus' way of life that exalts humanity at his own expense at every turn, but that James and John aren't much better...'even though they have been the butt of his irony about Gentiles, tax collectors, and other outcasts, and even though they have head his words to Peter about unlimited forgiveness—they still instinctively resort to salvation by bookkeeping'...they ask Jesus to rid the world of these ungrateful Samaritans once and for all.³ No matter how far we fall, no matter how blacklisted we

³ Robert Farrar Capon, 'Losing As Winning,' *Kingdom, Grace, & Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*, 204.

may be, no matter all our clumsy attempts to dispatch Jesus even when his love surrounds us and holds us fast, even as we are prone to resort to settling scores, Jesus refuses to see us as anything other than the objects of his love. He refuses to see us and our fellow Samaritans and all humanity as anything other than redeemed in Him, by Him, through Him. Even when we would rather take matters into our own hands or call down destruction on our enemies at the moment or return to a more conventional reward/punishment scorekeeping, Jesus offers extreme grace rather than something incremental. Instead, Jesus offers us a humanity that refuses to divide and conquer, create distinctions, or get our kicks on consigning certain members of our lot to destruction.

But then just as soon as we think we have figured Jesus out as a soft affirming and welcoming anybody no matter how bad or screwed up or how much they don't want to have anything to do to him, our passage continues, and we don't know if it comes from James or John or one of the other disciples or just a voice along the road, but someone shouts out, 'we will follow you wherever you go.' Wow, what a super-disciple, what commitment, what a powerful declaration and open-ended willingness. But Jesus, in the words of the hymn, 'You, Lord, Are Both Lamb and Shepherd,' preaches a way that is narrow by embodying a love that reaches wide. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head, are you willing to follow even there, he asks. The Son of Man is demanding and does not wait for us to tie up our arrangements he tells the person who asks to bury their father first or the one who wishes to say their goodbyes and tie up all their loose ends. In spite of its grace and extravagance toward all humanity, the call of discipleship is demanding on those who answer it and will require followers, in our own broken and middling ways, to live lives that refuse to easily condemn other people, to refuse to participate in the destruction and demonization of other human beings, and to be unwilling to write anyone off, even when they are the very people who are easy to write off, who would not think twice about writing us off, and who may even be happy to dismiss us all together.

Are you sure you want to do this, Jesus seems to be saying...because that is what it means to follow me. That is what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ. That is what it means to live a life that is assigned meaning even beyond resume and eulogy. A life that does not worry too much about whether our resume or our eulogy will ultimately define us, a life not imprisoned by the past, a life not hypnotized by constantly gazing backward, a life not sucked back two classes of humanity or wishing destruction on some and vindication on others. A life that moves forward expectantly, trusting that in Jesus Christ, every last one of us will not be destroyed, but might find redemption. Thanks be to God.