

## **“No Ifs, Ands, or Whats?”**

Galatians 5:1, 13-15, 22-23; Luke 9:51-62 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – June 29, 2025  
Installation Sunday

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be set free to serve your Christ with devotion, grace, and gratitude. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

---

You need to know that I did not specifically choose this passage from Luke to read on the day when we are installing our lay leaders. It was suggested by the lectionary, I promise. But it did seem like an interesting choice, given the timing, so I guess I'm guilty of accepting the suggestion. Sometimes it is important for us to wrestle with scripture. And today's lesson is certainly one that requires wrestling.

As we begin that struggle though, let's remind ourselves that we are wrestling with scripture, not with Jesus himself. The gospels are accounts – accounts of Jesus' life and ministry and theological significance, written decades after he had moved on, by people with specific agendas addressing particular communities of early Christians. Given all of that, you really might expect them to be a little more internally consistent, but here we are.

What struck me first about this passage is how seemingly contradictory it is. I asked you to get your Bibles out and read along, so that you could clearly see that we just read two different sections. Two Really Different sections! They almost seem to be talking about two different Jesuses. In that first part, they're traveling through a

Samaritan village. Something about Jesus has shifted: the writer tells us that now “his face was set toward Jerusalem.” It’s not entirely clear what that means. For Christians, looking back – like us or even the original recipients of Luke’s gospel – it could mean that Jesus is now being more open about his path leading to sacrifice and death. You can see how that could be a turn-off. But in the context of a Samaritan village, it could also just be as simple as the fact that Samaritans did not see Jerusalem as the center of their faith. It was one of the main divisions between the Samaritans and the Jews. Samaritans were focused on Mount Gerizim instead, so maybe they just weren’t interested in a potential Messiah who was heading to Jerusalem.

It’s the disciples’ reaction to that rejection that makes us think it might be something more. ‘Ooh, ooh, Jesus – do you want us to rain fire down on them?’ What?! What exactly do James and John think just happened? Are they hoping to ignite the Ultimate Flame War? The word “rebuked” is doing a lot of work in that next sentence, but it’s not hard to imagine either Jesus’ face or his tone of voice when he tells them to cool it. He is simply not that bothered by this rejection. It’s like he thought it wasn’t particularly surprising, or even worth worrying about. He knows this path is hard; he’s prepared for the fact that not everyone is going to get excited about it. And he’s willing to leave them be.

So where does that Jesus go? Because the next thing you know, they’re back on the road, and it’s like Jesus is intentionally goading would-be followers into

abandoning him. That grace that reprimanded the would-be arsonists is suddenly absent, as Jesus dares people to become homeless in order to follow him and even denies them the opportunity to grieve the loss of a parent. Who is this guy? Does the fact that his face is set toward sacrifice and death mean that we must deny everything pleasant about life ourselves? Is this Jesus? Or is this an agenda Luke was pushing, motivated by something specific within his community, that got exaggerated in this particular pericope?

Figuring out how to follow Jesus requires figuring out how we approach scripture. And part of what's hard about that is that scripture is not as clear about who Jesus was as we might like. Is this a Savior who declared that "whoever is not with is against me," as in Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:13, or a Savior who assured us that "whoever is not against is for us," as in Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50? And what happens when we're pressured to question our own level of commitment because we want to check in with family before taking off, or we have to skip a church event for a family funeral? There are those whose approach to scripture means that they must agonize over these verses, perhaps retaining an impression of Jesus as a strict taskmaster with little sympathy for our human state. But I would argue that the overall portrait of Jesus that the gospels offer us invites us to hold scripture less tightly, to "zoom out," if you will. Even the lectionary encourages us to hold this passage in conversation with others, for instance, the verses we read from Galatians.

“For freedom Christ has set us free,” it said. “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” It’s that last one that might be the key. “SELF-control.” Controlling others is not a fruit of the Spirit. When other people don’t respond to Jesus the way we think they should, we are not called to rain fire down upon them. We are only asked to be in charge of ourselves, monitoring our own level of commitment, not that of others. When Luke portrayed Jesus judging would-be followers unworthy because of their supposed wishy-washiness, was he showing us Jesus, or was he indulging in judging of his own?

As we come to commit ourselves to service this day, I’m not convinced it even matters how we make sense of the Jesus we find in the second half of this passage. If we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves, we will probably go to our own fathers’ funerals, just as we would go to our neighbors’ fathers’ funerals. And if there’s something happening at church on the day one of us is attending a funeral out of town, we will love our neighbors enough to pitch in and cover all the bases.

I hope that you know that stepping into leadership in this congregation does not demand that you drop everything else in your life. I trust that you have seen how we make service and leadership possible for people whatever various limitations their lives may currently involve. We want life in Christ to be an experience of freedom

and joy and grace, not an onerous duty or obligation. As your pastor, I fully believe that we “do church” best when no one of us does it all ourselves. We need one another, just as truly as we need God. That’s what church is for. When you need to say No to something, nobody is going to rain fire down upon you.

Sometimes in a church our size, it can feel like there aren’t enough people to do the things that need to be done. And yet, we’ve kept going. And when we’ve found ourselves worn out, new people with new energy have appeared on the scene. I wonder if that sort of desperation was motivating Luke when he wrote lines for Jesus daring people to do anything other than get in line behind him. Can you imagine trying to hold a church together with such desperation that you couldn’t take time to attend your own father’s funeral? That is not the freedom Christ set us free for. That is not the life abundant following Jesus should lead to.

This is a place where grace abounds. This is a place with a full basket of the fruit of the Spirit, overflowing with love and generosity and kindness. When one person needs to sit down, another will stand up. When the process needs to be adjusted to make it possible for someone to participate, creativity spills forth and new ways of serving are imagined. The Jesus we know here is the One with a twinkle in his eye, who meets us where we are and leads us forward, the One who knows what we’re capable of and when we need a nap, the One who will tell us what’s what when we’re feeling like raining down fire on someone, and the One who will tell us to buck

up and get busy when we've gotten complacent or distracted. The Jesus we know here is the One who came to earth specifically to experience our humanity, who knows what it is to be cold and tired, who knows what it's like to be hangry. The Jesus we know here weeps when we weep and sits with us in silence when it's all just too much. The Jesus we know here is the One who feeds us with the Bread of New Life and the Cup of God's Mercy, who offers us a seat at the Table of Grace, and laughs at all our jokes. The Jesus we know here is the Living Word that brings light and life, the lens of love through which we read all other words. That is the Jesus we commit to follow and serve this day, in all the many different ways we will do so. Hallelujah and Amen.