

“No Excuses”

Sermon – June 29, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

Sports, business, self-improvement – these are areas that we measure and demand success. Those who are the best tell you they train harder, work harder, and try harder. They see setbacks, not failures. They find a way to succeed – no excuses.

And by excuse, I mean trying to rationalize why we didn’t accomplish the goal. Rather than an objective explanation, an excuse attempts to justify or minimize our responsibility for an action or situation. An excuse aims to deflect blame or avoid accountability.

We all have made excuses in our lives. Part of personal growth is taking responsibility for our actions (or inactions) and being accountable.

Sometimes things happen beyond our control, but the question you should always ask, “If I’m being honest with myself, is there something I could have done to have a better outcome?”

For example, I typically am up late on Saturday nights when I write my sermons but that is on me. Yes, I have a day job and other responsibilities, but I know that I make choices that lead to this chronic situation. I take neither pride nor pity in it but accept it as a choice I make. If I want a different outcome, **I** need to do something differently.

Today’s scripture passages also deal with excuses or the lack thereof.

In the Old Testament passage from 2 Kings, Elijah tells Elisha that the Lord will take him up and that Elisha should stay there. But Elisha says, “No, I’m not leaving your side.” Eventually, Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit, which Elijah reluctantly agrees to—if when he is carried up that Elisha is there. He is and he does; Elijah is carried up

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and Elisha receives Elijah’s mantle and spirit. Elisha hung tough, even when the going got tough. No excuses.

In the epistle passage from his letter to the Galatians in chapter 5, Paul tells them that Christ has set them free but not for self-indulgence. He tells them in verse 14, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” No excuses.

Today’s gospel passage from Luke 9 is especially pivotal on this point. In fact, the gospel reading sounds more fitting for the liturgical season of Lent than post-Easter.

But in this lectionary year, Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is placed near the beginning of Ordinary Time, or the Sundays after Pentecost, in which the focus is on the Christian life.

From now until the end of October, we are on our way to Jerusalem. All of the Gospel lections for these next four months belong within Luke’s journey narrative which begins today as Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem” to be taken up (literally “ascension”) and concludes nearly ten chapters later with Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem.

We start our journey with Jesus deciding to go through Samaria, which was a bit dicey. The Samaritans were descendants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel 700 years ago but had intermarried with the Assyrians that had conquered them and had evolved their own worship of Yahweh. They had many conflicts with the Jews, who were descendants of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. There was great antipathy between the two peoples.

Jesus messengers go ahead of him to make overnight arrangements in a Samaritan city, but the city folk refuse, not just because the travelers

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were Jews, but because Jesus was headed to Jerusalem, the Jewish religious center, and as a prophet—which they did not want to implicitly facilitate by hosting them.

James and John's response to Jesus was “Shall we call down fire on them and consume them?” That seems a little harsh and a disproportional response. Clearly, they ask the question in anger and the desire to inflict punishment on the people of the village for the insult of refusing to receive Jesus. It recalls the story of Elijah (not from today’s passage) calling down fire and consuming two companies of fifty soldiers who had been sent by the King Ahaziah to inquire of Elijah whether he would live [2 Kings 1:10-12].

Jesus, however, rebukes James and John and disassociates himself from this tradition of violence. Throughout the gospels, Jesus always seeks to break the cycle of redemptive violence even when it could be “justified” by the law. Jesus is serious when he says, turn the other cheek. No excuses.

We then have three stories dealing essentially about the cost of discipleship. Following Jesus means resolute determination. It means sacrifice of security, filial duties, even family affection.

In the first, a person says, perhaps naively, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus points out his is itinerant ministry. They are more like nomads; no permanent location or Ritz Carlton for them.

In the second instance, Jesus calls to someone, “Follow me.” The person responds, “Let me first go bury my father.” Arguably, this is not an excuse. In fact, it was a major mandate in Judaism. Everyone, including the high priest, was expected to attend the funerals of their relatives and

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especially their father. So, Jesus’ demand in verse 60 to “let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” seems almost cruel or, at a minimum, insensitive. But again, no excuses.

In the last encounter in verses 61 and 62, another says, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” But Jesus responds, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Again, a pretty harsh retort. This harkens back to 1 Kings 19 [verse 19-21] where Elijah puts his cloak over Elisha, thereby inviting him to become his disciple. Elisha asks whether he may first go home and kiss his mother and father goodbye and Elijah gives him leave to do so. Jesus does not. Thus, Jesus is even more rigorous than Elijah in relation to the depth and intensity of commitment that he demands from his disciples. No excuses.

You may note all the connections today between Jesus and Elijah. Along with Moses the lawgiver, Elijah, regarded by many as the greatest prophet, appears in the Transfiguration alongside Jesus. Though Jesus doesn’t even mention Elijah in today’s passage, the people who heard these stories would pick up on the allusions and see how Jesus is holding an even higher standard.

Overall, the theme to this section of scripture is the cost of discipleship. Jesus compels us to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and must be our first priority. But that proclaiming is not just words, but actions. It is living our lives as Jesus did, particularly in helping people.

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Jesus demonstrates and models justice as a non-retaliation, of commitment to the kingdom of God rather than the kingdom of Israel or the kingdom of Judea or Samaria or the United States. And so, everything is to be evaluated according to the norms of the kingdom of God, of justice, peace, love, charity.

The principal commitments of those who would pursue justice and peace is a commitment to following Jesus’ way.

As biblical scholar Neil Elliott writes, “All that Jesus teaches about justice, about the right use of wealth, about prayer and steadfastness in his cause, he teaches as he leads his followers toward a final confrontation in Jerusalem.”

Like me, you may be saying, “Surely, Jesus doesn’t mean that I, personally, should devote my life to following him to exclusion of all else?” I don’t know. And that is what should keep us humble—not guilt-ridden, but also not complacent.

It also means we should not be despondent or fearful. It means as we see the rise of injustices around us, we must rise to the challenge even it means repercussions.

And we must resist the temptation of the flesh, of self-indulgence, to return evil with evil but instead employ the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. That is our measure of success.

As verse 25 in today’s Galatians passage says, “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” No excuses.

In the name of the God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer. Amen.