

Sermon for Sunday, February 24, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D. D., Pastor  
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"YOU CAN'T PLOW WALKING BACKWARDS"

St. Luke 9:57-62

Text: 'Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'" St. Luke 9:62

When I was a boy, tractors were still few and far between. It wasn't so much that they were not available, but it was the depression years and people just couldn't afford them. Some of my childhood memories of the Mississippi Delta include scenes of the field hands coming to the big barn before daylight to catch their mules, harness them up, and to be in the fields ready to plow at the crack of dawn. If you have never tried to plow, and have seen pictures in the movies or on television of men doing it, you may think it is a relatively simple thing to do. Let me assure you you are wrong. First, you have to control the animal. That may be no small matter, especially as the day wears on and he becomes hot and thirsty. Secondly, you have to control the implement. That is even more difficult. If you push down on the plow handles too much, the steel blade comes out of the soil. If you lift up too much, it bites so deeply that the mule is unable to pull it. So, there is a delicate balance you have to maintain at the same time you are controlling the animal. But that isn't all, either. You have to plow along a straight line. That involves not only setting some goal towards which you move unwaveringly, but it involves also keeping your eye on where you are at the moment. So, you see, plowing is not as simple as it might at first appear. Now, if you try to add to that complex procedure the picture of a man looking back at the same time, you begin to understand the analogy Jesus used. As a matter of fact, the force of the Greek words used in St. Luke means not only to look back, but to keep on looking back. And Jesus says that you just can't plow that way. You can't get the job done. He says, "no man who puts his hand to the plow and looks back--and keeps on looking back--is fit for the kingdom of God." Which is just another way of saying that you can't plow walking backwards.

In our scripture this morning there is a specific incident to which Jesus makes this saying. Three different men come to him and offer to be his disciples. In each case he discourages them. Now, I would just like to observe right here that Jesus never encouraged anyone to follow him without first counting the cost. He never asked anyone to make a decision lightly. The same is true today. Don't make a decision about Jesus lightly. Don't decide for him on the spur of the moment or under the impulse of some momentary emotion. Do it in the cold light of deliberation. The cost may be more than you had dreamed. The price may be more than you really want to pay.

In the case of the third man, he offers to follow Jesus but first he wants to go home and tell his loved ones farewell. Now, obviously Jesus detected something here that is not immediately apparent. He senses a tie between this man and his home that is not really going to be broken. He is going to be a man whose mind and heart will be back home. Even if he follows Jesus, his thoughts will be with his loved ones. Jesus says to him, "you can't do my work if you are always looking behind you, if you are trying to plow walking backwards."

Notice in the first place that you can't plow walking backwards because the door on yesterday is closed. Who of us have not had precious moments, the dearest of times, to which we would like to return. Surely all of us have events in our past that we would like to relive even if but for a moment. Sometimes we can hardly believe that something precious has come to an end, a final, irretrievable end. And no matter how much we would like to recall something or someone, no matter how much we would like to turn the clock back for even one last, sweet

moment, the door on yesterday is closed.

And there are other things in yesterday, too. Things we wish we could undo or unsay. Things we wish we could correct, some word of appreciation we wish we could speak or some deed of kindness and love we wish we could express. But, no, the door on yesterday is closed. What is past is past and we can never again go back and unlock that door.

Some years ago I took the children back to the little rural town where I was raised. I wanted to share with them my memories, the places, the people who made up my past. But everything seemed changed and different. It was not as I had remembered. The school house was boarded up, most of the stores had gone out of business, many homes were vacant, and a sleepy little southern town that I remembered as being vital and full of life--that for me had been the center of the whole universe--lay dying in the summer sun. I was reminded of the lines from John Burroughs,

He sought the old scenes with eager feet,  
The scenes he had known as a boy;  
"Oh, for a draught of those fountains sweet,  
And a taste of that vanished joy."  
He roamed the fields, he mused by the streams,  
He threaded the paths and lanes;  
On the hills he sought his youthful dreams,  
In the woods to forget his pains.  
Oh, sad, sad hills; oh, cold, cold hearth!  
In sorrow he learned the truth,  
One may go back to the place of his birth,  
He cannot go back to his youth.

No, the door on yesterday is closed. And you cannot plow walking backwards. Notice in the second place that the past is a guidepost, not a hitching post. Most of us do not like change. We want life to stay as it is for the most part. Many of us are somewhat like the cartoon character, Charlie Brown. One strip I remember shows him coming into the kitchen in his pajamas and saying to his mother, "Mom, I think I have discovered my difficulty in getting out of bed. I'm allergic to morning." Well, many of us are allergic to a new day, to change. Now, it should be obvious to all of us that not all change is progress. But, on the other hand, there can be no progress without change. And, because we don't like change, we tend to make the past a hitching post rather than a guidepost.

I suppose we are all guilty of talking about the "good old days". One example of this amazing capacity to hitch ourselves to the past is the television program, "The Waltons". Set in the time of the depression, it glorifies and glamorizes the poverty and deprivation of the thirties. But let me tell you, it was not like that at all. Women became bent and old before their time. Men were beaten and dejected and defeated. People went hungry, children couldn't afford to go even to the dentist. When you rub the glamor off, they were cruel times and not a one of us would swap today for those hard years. Hopefully we learned a lot from those years. But those days ought to be a guidepost for today and not a hitching post. As James Russell Lowell put it,

New occasions teach new duties;  
Time makes ancient good uncouth;  
They must upward still, and onward,  
Who would keep abreast of Truth....

Yes, today is today. It can never be yesterday. Yesterday can be our guidepost

but it should never be our hitching post. You can't plow walking backwards.

The third thing I would call to your attention is this: You forfeit the present if you are fixed on the past. Someone has said that yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not yet here, and the only moment we have is the present. I know people who have missed the present because they were looking to the future. I know a father who was so busy working for things for the future that his two boys grew up and he never really got to know them. He sat weeping in my study one day and cried out in anguish, "My boys are gone and I was so busy working for things for their future that I never got to know them. Now they are gone." By the same token, we can also forfeit the present by looking to the past.

There is a member of this church who is a special sort of friend of mine. She lost her husband about two years ago and it was very difficult for awhile. Somewhere along the way she made the decision to be grateful for the past but to live for the present. For example, she kept pushing me to do something for the older people and out of her prodding came the V.I.P. program of our church. Anyway, the other day she came by my office and we were chatting together. She said, "God gave me forty years with the man I loved. For a time grief drug me down until I thought I couldn't stand it. But then I decided that God had given me those wonderful years and I could be grateful for them. But," she said, "he gave me today, too, and I try to live each one as it comes."

It used to be that on Saturday nights when I was polishing up my sermon that I would get frustrated sometimes, or the sermon would bog down or it wouldn't be turning out like I wanted it to. I would leave my desk and go talk to my wife about my frustration. Elizabeth never tried to tell me what to do or say, but she would listen sympathetically and lovingly. Somehow, in the process of talking about it, I would go back to my desk and things would begin to fall into place. Last night was one of those frustrating times and I needed someone to talk to. I passed through the den where the girls were watching television and commented, "Boy, I sure miss your mother tonight." In a little while, one of the girls came in and said, "Daddy, I'm putting an apple pie in the oven." She knew it was my favorite. And then after a little more time had passed, the other girl came and said, "Dad, how's the sermon going?" Somehow, it made all the difference in the world. Those were precious moments that could be missed if one insisted on living in the past. No, you can't plow walking backwards. As St. Paul once put it, "forgetting what is past, I press toward the goal..." Yesterday is gone, tomorrow is not yet here, and this moment is the only one we have.

You know, life brings us many unexpected things--sometimes they are not pleasant and we don't understand them. Yet, this moment right now has meaning and significance because we can trust that whatever happened to us in days past, never for a moment were we out of God's hand; never for a moment was our situation out of his control. And we can trust the future, too. The future may not be pleasant--it may hold much emptiness, much loneliness, much uncertainty and fear. But the future, too, is in God's hand. Never for a moment will that future be out of his control. So, because we are freed from the past, and freed from the future because they are both in the hands of God, we can live this moment that God gives us. It is the only moment we have and we can't plow walking backwards.