

Sermon for Sunday, July 19, 1981 by Dr. Andrew A. Jumper
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"HOW TO PLOW IN THE FIELD OF LIFE"

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 growing up in rural Mississippi, 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 in to the big barn before daylight to catch their mules, harness them up, and to be in the field 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 simply 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. Second, 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 ahead towards which you move unwaveringly, but it also involves 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 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 said you just can't plow that way. 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."

In our scripture this this morning there is a specific incident to which Jesus relates this saying. He talks to three different men about discipleship--about following him. In each case he discourages them. One man says he will follow Jesus wherever he goes, but Jesus says in effect, "count the cost--it may be more than you are willing to pay." Another man is willing to follow, but first he has another responsibility. Jesus says to him, "To be my disciple you have to get your priorities in order." The third man wants to follow Jesus but first he wants to go home and tell his loved ones farewell. Now, obviously Jesus detects something here that is not immediately apparent. He senses a tie between this man and his home that will not really be broken. He is going to be a man who is always looking back, whose heart and mind will always be turned homeward. Even if he follows Jesus, he will always be looking back over his shoulder at what he has left behind. Jesus said to him, "You can't plow the furrow as I want you to plow if your eyes are fixed on the past."

So Jesus discourages decisions for discipleship that are lightly made. He says, "Count the cost--get your priorities in order--and don't look back." Well, that is still good advice for the person who decides for Jesus. For example, take just one area of the Christian life such as tithing. Suppose you decide to be a disciple of Jesus and the Bible says that a Christian is

one who tithes. First, count the cost. Are you willing to tithe? Second, get your priorities in order. When it comes time to pay the monthly bills, what comes first? Third, don't look back. That is, never grieve over all you could have done with that money. Now, if you aren't willing to do those things, Jesus discourages you from making a decision you can't--or won't--keep.

Well, this morning I would like to focus in on the man to whom Jesus said that he couldn't plow looking back. Notice in the first place that you can't plow looking back because the door on yesterday is closed. All of us have 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. For example, when a loved one dies 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 that loved one, no matter how much we would like to turn the clock back for even one last, sweet moment, the door on yesterday is closed.

But 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 go back again and unlock that door.

Several years ago I took my wife back to the little rural town where I was raised. I wanted to share with her my memories, the places, the people who made up my past. But everything was so changed and different. It was not as I remembered it. The school house was being torn down, most of the stores had gone out of business and the roofs of several had rotted and fallen in. A sleepy little southern town that I had 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; of, cold, cold earth!
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 of yesterday is closed. If our lives are dominated by the past we cannot live today nor plan for tomorrow. Notice in the second place that the past should be a guidepost, not a hitching post. Most of us are guilty of resisting change--we want life to stay as it is. You've heard of the seven last words of Christ? Many congregations also have a seven last words. They are: "We never did it that way before." Many of us are somewhat like Charlie Brown in the Peanuts comic strip. Once he was shown 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 allegric 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. Because we don't like change, we tend to make

the past a hitching post rather than a guidepost. One thing I have noticed about older people is this: some are old in body and spirit, but some are just old in body. The latter retain a zest for living, an enthusiasm about today and what will happen tomorrow. They are open to new and different things. And somehow they have a joy in living that is contagious. None of us can keep from growing old in body, but if we are not hitched to the past we can stay young in spirit. 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 looking back.

The third thing I would call to your attention about plowing is this: not only must you have a goal in front to which you are moving, but you must also pay attention to where you are. To put it another way, you forfeit the present if you are fixed on tomorrow. Are you guilty of that? I know there have been times when I did that. I have had times in my life when I was working so hard towards some future goal that I never enjoyed the present. I think most of us do that. Not long ago a father sat in my study literally dissolved in tears. He had had many goals and dreams for things he wanted to do for his family and he had worked hard so he could give his boys certain things. Suddenly he discovered that while he had reached his goals, in the meantime the boys had grown up and left home. He cried, "My boys are gone and I was so busy with things for their future that I never had time for them. Now they are gone and I have lost those precious years." Well, I can sympathize with that. Can you? Do you ever get so focused on what is going to happen or what tomorrow will bring that you don't enjoy or appreciate life today?

Robert Frost, in one of his poems, puts it this way:

Oh, give us pleasure in the flowers to-day
And give us not to think so far away
As the uncertain harvest; keep us here
All simply in the springing of the year.

Yes, if we are totally fixed on the past or totally fixed on the future, we miss the one thing God has given us--this moment.

But having said that, let me add one final thought and it is this: if a man wants to plow the field of life, he must also know where he is going. It is true you cannot plow looking back, it is true you must watch where you are at the moment. But it is also true that to plow a straight furrow, you must know where you are going. Where are you going this morning? Where do you want to be spiritually a year from now--five years from now? What things would you like to have done six months from now or two years from now? When your time runs out, what contributions do you hope to have made, what noble tasks do you plan to have done? Well, if you don't have a goal--if you have no objective in life, you are not likely to arrive at a place you don't know you are going to! St. Paul once said, "forgetting what is past I press on toward the goal of the upward call of God..." St. Paul knew how to plow in the field of life. He was not hitched to the past, but he enjoyed each moment and he had a goal in life--he knew where he was going. How about you? Have

you set down some specific goals you want to achieve? Are you drifting through life without any clear-cut objectives? If so, the rows you plow in life will be crooked and twisting, not going anywhere. Maybe all of us need to go home this morning and set down some goals, some things we want to accomplish, and then set about our job of plowing!

No, we can't plow life's field looking back. We must enjoy each moment and so plan for the future that we accomplish those goals, reach those objectives, that will make life worthwhile. Henry van Dyke has a poem entitled "Life". It is really a sort of prayer in which he prays that he will not be held back by the past, but will enjoy each moment and not be afraid of the future. He concludes this way: "My heart will keep courage of the quest, And hope the road's last turn will be the best." That's my hope for my life--is it for yours? Yes, the hope that we will so put our hand to the plow that in life's quest the very last turn will be the best.