

The Hard and Holy Way
Luke 9:51-62 & Psalm 77
June 26, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

Maybe you have had, or have right now, a child in your life who is a “learn it the hard way” kid. Maybe you *were* a “learn it the hard way kid.” You know this kid, regardless. It’s the kid you tell that raw onion should not be eaten like an apple. It will taste terrible. You won’t like it. But the “learn it the hard way” kid, when you’re looking the other way, picks up a big chunk of raw, white onion, and pops it in their mouth. Then they spit it out and cry, because they don’t like it, and it tastes terrible. *Just like you told them it would.* But they’re a “learn it the hard way” kid, and that’s exactly what they do. Don’t touch the stove; it’s hot and it will burn you. Learn it the hard way kid gets a blister. Learn it the hard way kid refuses to reapply sunscreen when they’re at the water park with their friends. Learn it the hard way kid is susceptible to worse outcomes than sunburn as they get older and into more dangerous situations. Learning it the hard way is not really something to aspire to. At some point, it’s good if we learn to trust people who have been there before us, people who are wise and know what they’re talking about, people who have our best interests at heart. Trusting them is better than learning it the hard way. Those wise people tell us that avoiding the hard way is a better way to learn.

Our call to worship psalm, Psalm 77, talks about God’s way being holy. God’s way, the Psalmist tells us, is the way of the Exodus, the guidance in the wilderness, all of God’s mighty deeds. That’s the holy way of God. We might note, right off the bat, that nowhere does the Psalmist claim that God’s way is easy. Just holy. And rooted in God’s actions.

The disciples would have known that. They would have been rooted in that same history, that same foundational story of their Jewish faith. God’s way is holy, but not easy.

I’m also more than a little suspicious that at least some of the disciples had been “learn it the hard way” kids. The way they seem to be slow to catch on to what Jesus is trying to teach them and show them and tell them. Just a suspicion on my part.

In this group of conversations with Jesus, the way of Jesus starts to get clearer, and the disciples do have to learn about it the hard way. The hard and holy way of Jesus. Our first clue that Jesus’s way is both hard and holy, is the

phrase that Luke uses several times, that Jesus has “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” For the next ten chapters in Luke, Jesus will be slowly and deliberately and unavoidably making his way toward Jerusalem, where of course the cross ultimately awaits him. So Luke is telling us that Jesus has, even at this point, already accepted what the end will be and is intentionally turning toward that hard and holy way.

Along the way, Jesus tries to stay for a bit at a Samaritan village. Contrary to all customs of hospitality, they refuse to receive him. The disciples are mad, and they want to respond in kind, what seems reasonable to them. So this is what they ask Jesus, “Don’t you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” This sounds childish, maybe. An overreaction, possibly. But when people that we already thought were our enemies confirm our every expectation, and then act even worse than that, well. That’s exactly what we want to do. We want to berate them and deride them and call them names and if we had the power to rain down fire from heaven, there are occasions when that’s pretty tempting, too. However. Jesus says no. Apparently quite strongly, because Luke says he “rebukes” them. It would have been easy to get revenge and act as bad as that village did. But Jesus calls them to a hard and holy way, a way of restraint, to keep moving on to another village, on the way toward Jerusalem.

There’s then a quick succession of interactions between Jesus and strangers. The first volunteers “I’ll follow you,” which is not the usual pattern of Jesus calling and a disciple following. But Jesus responds, essentially, “You’ll have no home and no place.” Jesus responds, “It’s a hard and holy way.” No mention of what the person does after Jesus says that.

The next encounter, Jesus says, “Follow me,” but the person says, “Well, but I have to go and bury my father.” That seems to be a request to wait till the person’s father dies, in order that the child can fulfill the duty of taking care of the parent. So it’s more of a long-term, “Let me do this one thing and then I’ll follow Jesus.” Jesus’s response is a call to a hard and holy way: “Let the dead bury their own dead. You, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

The next person, similarly, requests leave to say goodbye to the folks at home, but Jesus tells them not to look back. Just follow. A hard and holy way.

These aren’t easy things that Jesus is asking. Don’t fight back when your enemies treat you terribly and insult you. Don’t get attached to any place. Don’t get attached to any people; in fact, you need to detach yourself from the people you love already. Come and follow.

It’s a hard and holy way. It calls us to sacrifice and make hard choices. It

would be easier to just avoid reading this passage or thinking about it. Who wants to sign up for something that's going to be this hard? Not many. God's way is holy. God's way calls us into a wilderness. Jesus calls us to pick up our cross and follow. Learn it the hard way, walk in the hard way, trust in the one who calls us and comes with us in the hard and holy way.