

*Choices and Consequences*

*June 30, 2019 • Christ Church, Clermont-Ferrand • Third Sunday after Pentecost*

*Text: Luke 9:51: "... he set his face to go to Jerusalem."*

I come from a long line of farmers who tilled the soil in the midwest of the United States. They grew fields of beans and maize, and they knew what it was like to work the land on sweltering summer days.

Because of this I can confidently say that I learned when I was young how to plow a field. My father had grown up on a farm in the western part of Michigan, and although we had a house set on a one-acre lot, he was determined that at least a quarter of our lot would be turned over to the purpose of a small farm, or a large garden, depending on how you looked at it.

My job was to prepare the soil using a hand-driven, gasoline powered rotary tiller. It had a reach of about a meter wide, which meant that it took about fifty passes back and forth to till the soil just once. And my father's view was that to do this right you had to do it three times: once to open the land, once with fertilizer, and once more after a day after a good rain.

Only when that was done could you plow the furrows that would receive the seeds. That was where the plowing lesson came in.

When Jesus says that no one who sets his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God, he reveals that he knows something about plowing a field.

When you plow a furrow in a field, you have to set the blade of the plow in the earth and then pick out a spot all the way across the field—and keep your eyes on that spot as you move forward. If you do that, you'll end up with a straight furrow.

If you look back over your shoulder to see where you've been, or how much progress you've made, or whether someone is coming out with a water bottle for you, you will end up with a very wavy furrow. And that will mean wasted space—which to a farmer is the same thing as wasted money.

I thought about this teaching as I looked out at the endless farm fields on the train from Paris yesterday. Disciples don't look back. That is the first lesson Jesus teaches us this morning. There are lots of reasons why we want to; there are so many ties of fondness and love that bind us to the past.

But disciples are meant to be pressing forward toward God's call, always. We are not meant to spend any time idealizing the past, much less mourning it.

The last words of this little selection from Luke's gospel has the effect, and maybe the intention, of underscoring the gravity of the first words of it: "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus has picked out a mark all the way in front of him to head toward. He will not be distracted or turned aside from the objective he has set for himself.

We know from studying the single, two-volume work that is the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles that this is a major turning point in Luke's story. The whole narrative structure of the Gospel of Luke hinges on the decisive moment Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is where the God of heaven and earth will confront the powers of this world. Jerusalem is where all the barriers that we have managed to set up between God and ourselves will be finally thrown down, once for all. Jerusalem is where Jesus will accomplish the work of salvation, where the cross will be raised and the tomb will be emptied, where the Resurrection will give love the last word.

It sounds brave, even heroic. But it comes at a great cost. We are told that the people of Samaria would not receive him—not because of who he was or what he taught, but because he had decided on a course of action and was sticking with it. “They would not receive him, because he had set his face to go to Jerusalem.”

So it is not just that disciples don't look back. It's that disciples say their prayers, and consider God's call to them, and then stick to a chosen path forward. We set our faces on the future, and that is where we are going.

And there will be people who will not receive us, people who will not agree with us, because we are not willing to look back. There will be people who will not come with us, because they would prefer not to keep their eyes fixed in the direction toward which we have set our faces—the direction of God's uncertain, unknowable, but grace-filled future.

There are consequences to our choices. We all learn that at a very young age, just like me learning to plow that field. And when we are disciples, our choices still have consequences—even when we make them for the best, most prayerful reasons.

We cannot be in discernment forever. At some point, we must decide. We, here, must decide what course we will follow. We must decide whether we will set our faces on the future, and set our hand to the plow—or whether we will keep looking behind us, forgetting that without the plow the garden will not grow. *Amen.*