

How Sure Am I?

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Scripture Text:

1 Kings 19:15-21 New International Version (NIV)

¹⁵The LORD said to him, "Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. ¹⁶Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. ¹⁷Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. ¹⁸Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him." ¹⁹So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. ²⁰Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother goodbye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" ²¹So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his servant.

Luke 9:51-62 New International Version (NIV)

⁵¹ As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; ⁵³ but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them[a]?" ⁵⁵ But Jesus turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then he and his disciples went to another village.

⁵⁷ As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go."

⁵⁸ Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

⁵⁹ He said to another man, "Follow me."

But he replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

⁶⁰ Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

⁶¹ Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family."

⁶² Jesus replied, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."



Sermon Text:

I hate to shop. I think it skips a generation in my family. My mother loved it, my daughter loves it. Me? I go only when I know exactly what I need. I enter a store, do the rounds quickly to see if they have it or not, and if not, I'm out in a flash. When I shop, I shop with focus. With a purpose. Decisively.

Do you remember in grade school or high school when the teacher asked a question and you or someone in your class was certain of the answer, they would raise their hand with gusto. With purpose! They were sure.

Do we behave the same way in matters of faith? Are there some things we are certain of? Do we show it in how we live? Or do we live as if we're not sure of anything. After all, isn't the meaning in Scripture open to interpretation? I want to encourage you today to live out your faith decisively. Please pray with me. (prayer)

Today's Scripture from 1 Kings gives us 2 examples across a range of faith decisiveness – one is Elijah. In the story just before what we read today, Elijah was on an emotional roller coaster. First he destroyed the 450 prophets of Baal, a decisive victory. Then he got intimidated by Jezebel and ran for his life. He felt totally defeated and cried out to God claiming he was the only one who remained faithful and he was giving up. Elijah was downright suicidal. In God's reply, while he seemed to accept that Elijah wanted to retire, he pointed out that 7000 remained faithful and he told Elijah to go prepare his successor. Elijah provides an example of wavering faith.

Elisha on the other hand was decisive. When Elijah invited Elisha to study under him (this is the meaning of throwing his cloak around him), Scripture says that Elisha left his oxen and ran after Elijah. He slaughtered his oxen burned his plow and cooked the oxen meat for the people. There was no going back. He decisively turned to follow Elijah with no option of going back. He made the commitment.

In Luke's Gospel, it reads "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus RESOLUTELY set out for Jerusalem." Resolutely – In an admirably purposeful, determined and unwavering manner. (New Oxford American Dictionary). He was



unaffected by the rejection by those in the Samaritan village who didn't welcome him because he was heading to Jerusalem. He was unaffected by not having any place to lay his head. His determination was further revealed in his reply to the man who had excuses as to why he could not yet follow Jesus. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." This may sound harsh...it does to me. But Jesus is resolutely heading to Jerusalem to die for our sins, and for him there is no looking back. He is clear that for those that follow him from this point on, there is no turning back. Will we follow Jesus, or will we waver?

I'd venture to say that every person here has made a decision to follow Jesus. If you haven't, then please let's have a conversation after the service. You're here. You're in church. Is that what the decision meant to you? That you would come to church? That's not too tough. I don't want to minimize that...I mean there are a lot of people who are NOT here because their Sunday mornings are precious to them. It's a big deal that you are here and I thank you for coming. But that's not all we signed on for when we decided to follow Christ, is it?

When you joined the UMC, you took some membership vows. According to *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, members make covenant to do 7 things. Out of the 7, only 2, maybe 3, are specific to joining a church. The other 5 are really what it means to covenant to live in the Christian faith – to follow Christ.

1. To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of their sin; (Decisively choose Jesus over Satan.)
2. To accept the freedom and power God gives them to resist evil, injustice, and oppression; (We admit we can't do it alone and that we need and accept the power of the Holy Spirit to help us.)
3. To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put their whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as their Lord; (Jesus is the boss...His grace is all we need. we'll trust and live his way)



4. To remain faithful members of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representatives in the world; (this is the universal church... we will identify as part of Christ's family, the new Israel, in Christ, not of the world. We're God's ambassadors in this unholy place.)

5. To be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church and do all in their power to strengthen its ministries;

6. To faithfully participate in its ministries by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness;

7. To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.¹ (Okay, so now we might have some difficulty. Do we commit to all that Scripture says? What if we don't understand it all?)

I am afraid that we sometimes allow our inability to understand all of Scripture to give us reason or excuse to waver on even the parts we do understand. Or maybe we don't like something Scripture says, so we don't really want to accept that part. Well do you think Jesus liked the idea of going to Jerusalem to be hung on a cross? I don't think so! Yet he resolutely set out for Jerusalem. Now Jesus did have something we don't have... perfect clarity. Although some theologians believe Jesus gave up his omniscience when he became human and experienced progressive revelation throughout his life. This means he didn't always know he was the Messiah, but came to learn it just like we come to know things of God – through study of Scripture and through prayer. Either way, I think it's safe to say we're not going to have the clarity of understanding of all that God is and all God wants of us that Jesus had. Still, we can experience progressive revelation as we study and pray. And we must do so.

And we **can** live our lives decisively for Jesus. Paul instructs the Galatian churches in chapter 5 of his letter to Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set you free. **Stand firm**, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery." He's



telling them that they are free from the bondage of sin and can live decisively for Christ. He continues, “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge in the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “love your neighbor as yourself.” If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, **dissensions, factions** and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal 5:1, 13-25).

Paul tells the church to decisively leave their old ways and live in the Spirit. I expect you are all endeavoring to do so. I know I am. He warns that those who continue to live in sin will not inherit the kingdom. Notice the list he includes in acts of the flesh.... Sexual immorality impurity and debauchery. First, let me clarify that this does not imply here any reference to homosexuality. It’s referring to any kind of unbridled sexual indulgence, without regard to gender. I think most of us know we need to avoid this. But then also in the same list is discord, dissensions and factions. These also lead to the same consequence of losing the kingdom inheritance. This seems harsh. Look around. There is dissension and divisiveness everywhere. As Christians, this is fleshly living. As representatives of Christ in this world, we need to rise above the common practice of today and not draw lines in the sand. We need to avoid the Us and Them mentality and stand for unity. This is really hard right now politically. We are a people divided and there are forces calling us to be even more polarized. These are evil forces! We need to resist these evil forces, decisively – resolutely- however subtle they are, and love each other no matter what our political leanings. We can be kind and courteous and watch out for the poor and marginalized no matter what party we’re in. We have to. The kingdom is at stake!



We are living in uncertain times in the UMC as well. We too are divided. I am not going to try to persuade you to pick a side today on the issue of human sexuality. In fact, I am going to plead with you to do just the opposite. Once again, there are forces trying to divide us and if I read Paul correctly in his letter to the Galatians, these are evil forces. We must rise above. So here's the rub. We are to stand firm and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures, and yet we don't all read Scripture the same way on this topic.

I suggest that we start studying the Scripture together on the topic of Human Sexuality in an honest attempt to understand and seek God's guidance. But more than that I want to ask you to keep this in perspective. There are 6 verses in all of Scripture that are said to condemn homosexuality. 6. We can easily look closely at each of them in a Bible Study. There are 139 verses in Scripture that call us not to judge and we just read Paul about losing the kingdom over factions. We cannot let these 6 verses divide us. There are over 2000+ Scriptures on poverty, money- dealing with the rich and the poor, social justice issues. These are summed up in Micah 6:8 "What does the Lord require of us but to seek justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with our God." On this we are not divided. On this the will of God is clear. 2000+ verses! Does anyone have any doubt that Jesus called us to love and serve the poor? To consider the alien/Samaritan as our neighbor? Are we living like we're sure of that or are we letting forces divide us on that as well?

Here at MUMC we are busy doing the work and will of God; just look at our list of ministries in Fellowship Hall. But we too can get distracted by the busyness and miss the Will, and I fear that the very same list can be a warning to us. Over a year ago now, many of us met down at Pecometh to talk about who we are and want to be as a church in this time and place. Well, our current mission is "*To Connect with God, each other and the world through our prayers, presence, GIFTS and service.*" This could be for any church, but what is the specific DNA of MUMC? We discussed this and agreed on the following statement. "*The MUM church should be a living example of God's Kingdom in the Village of Marshallton and beyond*". We brainstormed and listed the attributes of the Kingdom of God. We examined our long list of ministries and identified those which are CORE to our mission and to who we are. We agreed that to grow we'd need to prune as well. We decided to adopt the mindset of experimentation – try stopping some things, refocusing



some things and maybe we'd have room to start some new things. Each change is not necessarily forever but is an experiment to see how it works.

We agreed to “challenge” the peripheral activities to try to do things differently to be more in line with our “core” purpose. We agreed to engage the community more, and to add Christ-centered program to our social events as a means of soft-style evangelism. Research shows that the more a church focuses internally, the closer it moves to the path of a dying church. We agreed that we need to redirect our fellowship activities more outwardly. Are we inviting the community to ALL our more social events? What Christ-centered programs are we adding to them? We are not a social club. If we are raising money, is it for something the community can get behind? If not, I question if we should be focusing there at all. What impacts those in our community right now and how can we help? How can we be more relevant? We are making some progress, however slowly.

Yet I still fear there is discord among us. Factions? We have had difficulty getting new people into leadership roles. Did you know that in Ancient Israel, when God spoke directly to Moses, God insisted that those working in service at the Tabernacle retire at age 50 and yet stay involved to help their younger brothers? I don't think the number 50 is the point here, but I sense retiring from leadership roles at MUMC at all is difficult here. Let's make sure we don't raise too much resistance to new ways of doing things – experiments.

In some cases I think in an effort to run our ministries efficiently, we forget that the point is not efficiency but growth through service. At FP we had an expression – “purposeful inefficiency”. We want to purposely see how many volunteers we can engage because it's the act of serving that changes lives, not efficient ministries. Why not reach out to someone and invite them to come along and help – to learn how the work is done, then they are equipped to take the lead should they be needed. I am distressed whenever I hear that someone volunteered to help with something but were told “no thank you”. We need to find ways to say YES, CERTAINLY...here's how you can help.

Everyone of us is here because we have decided to follow Jesus and we all are committed to serve. We have enough ways to help out around here that no body need be turned away. And I bet we can do more community engagement, too. How might we ask



for volunteers from our community? It's not about being busy; It's about being busy in service of God and equipping each other to serve and to lead. I am sure this is our calling. How sure are you?

United Methodists have always been about being the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. Of this we are sure. Let's stay United Methodists and obey God in the parts of Scripture that are clear to us. Let's love each other and our neighbors as we would love ourselves and live this way decisively. May we rise above and stand against any forces that may try to divide us. Yes, there may be a few verses over which there is disagreement. The UMC has disagreement on other social issues as well, like Capital Punishment, or serving in the military, but we don't let that divide us or distract us from our unified mission. Let's refocus on our mission here at MUMC and let us love and love decisively. Resolutely. For the kingdom is at stake. Amen.

