



THE LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION

A COMMUNION OF CHURCHES – EINE KIRCHENGEMEINSCHAFT – UNA COMUNIÓN DE IGLESIAS – UNE COMMUNION D'ÉGLISES
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Office of the General Secretary

Sermon by:

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On the occasion of

**The installation of Rev. Hans-Wilhelm Kasch and
the opening of the LWF Center in Wittenberg
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Luke 9:57-62

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

May the meditation of our hearts, the words of my mouth, find acceptance in the sight of God our Creator and Redeemer. Amen.

This text makes many of us feel somewhat uneasy and unsure. I suppose this is due to several reasons. Firstly, it carries a tone of someone who, though wanting to engage others, is very demanding and, to a certain extent, very brushy. I assume also that many of you present here today have some experience, directly or indirectly, in recruiting employees or volunteers for the church or for other work places in society. And from your personal experience you would certainly agree that if conditions cited in the gospel text (Luke 9:57-62) were ever incorporated as requirements for appointments, recruitment results would be zero. Therefore, from accumulated experience, we know that this is not the way to go if we want to get good results.

The second reason, why on reading this text we forever remain uncomfortable, may be due the fact that we unconsciously identify with the three *would-be* disciples. The first of the three goes out of his way to find Jesus, carefully listening to Jesus and assessing what he said. And evaluating what he did. On the strength of his declaration, "I will follow you wherever you go", it is reasonable for us to assume that he saw in Jesus a Messiah. The account rendered by the gospel writer Matthew (8:8-20) identifies this person as a Teacher of the Law i.e. one of the scribes. For that reason his declared intention was not just an impulsive response to what



Jesus said or did. He had given as much thought as he could and yet Jesus seems to dismiss him offhandedly. In many ways we see ourselves in him.

The two others whom Jesus invites are equally willing to follow him, but due to compelling domestic reasons related to family and home, they openly request to defer for a while the starting date. The reasons that they give for this deferment are very sound and convincing for us. Have we not postponed or cancelled appointments because a member of the family was taken ill? Have we not reduced working hours because one of our children has a special condition? Have we not resigned from positions at work or in the community due to the situation of ageing parents? Those of us whose parents have passed away, have we not suddenly changed all other plans to organize the funeral? Of course we have. This is normal. It is expected of us. The would-be disciple, who asked for a leave of absence to bury his father, is in fact keeping the commandment that calls everyone to honor their father and mother so that their days on earth may be increased. Is it not correct to say every culture upholds the injunction of parental respect?

It is quite clear that we sympathize with the would-be disciple that Matthew identifies as the scribe and who took the time to listen and to evaluate what Jesus was about. We sympathize and recognize ourselves in the two others who accepted the invitation but kindly requested a later starting date. So we recognize ourselves in their excuses. Somehow in the back of our minds, we are amazed, if not disappointed, at the way Jesus deals with them. Since he seems to rough them up, we too feel roughed up because, as said earlier, their excuses are actually our excuses. We have difficulties in accepting the statements Jesus makes about how we should relate to our beloved families and our homes. In our various cultures and traditions, the family and home are understood as the foundations and cornerstones of society.

One of the keys towards understanding this seemingly difficult text is to read it in the context of the entire Chapter 9. From the preceding sections one senses a strong tone of urgency running like a golden thread throughout this chapter. Jesus is in a hurry. The time is short. The horizons and skies are saturated with seeds and signs of the kingdom of God. There is an urgent need to announce the good news. In light of these developments, Jesus dispatched the twelve disciples into the neighboring villages to proclaim the breaking-in of the kingdom; he gives them the power and authority to heal the sick as a sign of the advent of God's reign. He provided food for the five thousand as God did for the children of Israel during their sojourn in the desert.

In that context Jesus, being in a hurry, invites Peter, John and James to withdraw with him for a time of prayer and reflection on a mountain. The prayer occasion culminates in a summit between Jesus and two ancient prophets, Moses and Elijah. There is no press coverage for the Holy Summit. Except for a cryptic phrase that says, "They were speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem." The company of these two ancient prophets underlines in a very significant way the urgency of the moment. Jesus was at the end of his ministry. He needed to put together a team of disciples for the continued proclamation of the gospel. In a similar context, Luke reports another instance when Jesus intervenes as a matter of urgency to resolve a controversy among the twelve disciples. They were quarreling over the issue of seniority and succession among them. The controversy had the potential not only to destroy the *unity* among them, but it also demonstrated that they were preoccupied with a different priority namely that of *social status*.

With these events as background, the conversation between Jesus and the three *would-be* disciples is placed in the proper context. It is quite clear that there is therefore nothing intrinsically wrong with having a commitment to one's family or for that matter, a home; there is absolutely nothing wrong about keeping one's obligation towards one's parents; it is proper and good to say in an orderly way good-bye to family members. At the end of it all,

let's remember that when Jesus was on the cross, he entrusted his mother to John the disciple. Therefore, Jesus is not talking about parental funerals or good-byes to family. Jesus is talking about correct priorities and genuine commitment. The point he was making to the three would-be disciples was that he is priority number one; they must put him first and above all things, including their home and family. Taking time off to bury a parent or to say good-bye was not the issue. The main point that Jesus is driving home is that these relationships must not become hindrances that keep us from *wholeheartedly* following Christ. He is talking about qualitatively changed relationships which are a mark of how different the values of the Kingdom of God are from the values of the Kingdom of this world. It means a relearning of what is important in life.

In this regard Jesus does not conceal or downplay what it takes and what it costs to be a disciple. Many times he spoke about the high cost involved in discipleship and urged every one of the would-be disciples not to follow him unless and until they had measured the costs. Therefore, he does not want to discourage any one of us, but he wants us to follow him only if we understand what discipleship is about. Our love for our family or home cannot be in competition with our love for God. Our love for God must always have a higher priority than our love for family. While it may be true that we demonstrate our love for God by loving our neighbor and family, we cannot put family above God. When we truly love God, we can truly love our family and neighbor because this enables us to serve them better.

My dear sisters and brothers, we are gathered on this Sunday from different parts of the Federal Republic of Germany, from within the town of Wittenberg and as representatives of people and churches outside the Republic of Germany. During this service, Pastor Hans-Wilhelm Kasch will be installed as the Director of the LWF Center in Wittenberg by the Presiding Bishop of the VELKD. At the same time, we participate in the official opening of the LWF Center in Wittenberg. The significance of the city of Wittenberg is not rooted in the fame of the persons of Martin Luther, Katherina von Bora, Philipp Melancthon, Ms Katherina Krapp (the daughter of the mayor of Wittenberg) and others. This is a city and a place that received during the time of the Reformation, eminent ecclesiastical personalities from the Coptic Church in Africa, students from the region of what we call today West Africa, from high ranking delegations from England and representatives from the Patriarchate in Constantinople. They came to this place for consultation with Luther and his colleagues. The importance of Wittenberg is rooted in what the Reformation stands for in the history of the Church. In spite of all other negative side effects the Reformation was an initiative that led to the **rediscovery** of the gospel and the desire to **renew** the church of Jesus Christ.

In this connection, my dear sisters and brothers, I find the reply of Jesus to the third would-be disciple instructive *“No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God”* relevant for this occasion. Jesus lifts up high a principle that most likely every farmer or driver of a vehicle will understand. We all know from life experience that no one can plough a straight furrow while at the same time looking backward. In as much as nobody can drive a car while looking only at the rear view mirror. Jesus seems to have known that the third person in the text would never come back. The family would not let him go simply because so much was dependent on him being around.

In the light of this the Lutheran World Federation Centre in Wittenberg is an important place not because of geography; not because it is intended to be a **mighty fortress** for all things, protestant and/or Lutheran. But rather as a place from which the churches of the Lutheran family renewed by the gospel of Jesus Christ will work for unity of the Church and human family. It will be a place and a channel among others, where our common heritage and separate experiences will be shared as gifts for the Church of Jesus Christ.

My dear brother Kasch, you have been called to direct this Centre. It is our hope and prayer that Jesus Christ to whom the gospel is a witness, will guide you throughout the day of your ministry so that the gifts of the Church may be truly shared through this Lutheran World Federation Centre in Wittenberg. Let it be a place and a channel through which Lutheran churches around the world may also receive the gifts of the Church from other sister churches in the world.

In the month of October this year in Augsburg and in many other parts of the world, we shall commemorate the 10th Anniversary of the Join Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. Following the Augsburg event, there will be a planting of trees in the Luthegarden marking a Luther Decade that will culminate in 2017. This will be an important ecumenical event intended to open our eyes to see beyond the ecumenical difficulties that are weighing heavily on the ecumenical movement. In installing Pastor Kasch and in dedicating this Centre we firmly believe that our gracious God will provide inspired and insightful disciples for this new Ecumenical Era.

Amen.