What comes to your mind when you hear the word “radical?” Do you think of yourself in conjunction with that word? Or, is a radical someone else who is out on the fringes, pushing the envelope, and definitely more strange than you want to be? To be honest, when I hear the word “radical” I do not think of myself. And now we are confronted by this text. There is no way around it; this is radical stuff!

Are you aware that the word “radical” comes from the Latin *radix* which means “a root.” Rather than being something on the fringes that is strange and edgy, radical is right at the root of things. A root is central to the life of a plant. Without roots a plant will die. Without a radical understanding of compassion and without a commitment to a radical challenge, our faith will no longer live either. Let’s talk about what all of this means for us today.

**AT THE INTERSECTION . . . LOOK FORWARD**

“. . . he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (v. 51)

The passage begins with another picture of the compassion of Jesus. We see this compassion in two powerful ways.

**Salvation for the world** – At this point in his ministry Jesus was looking forward to what needed to come next. He knew that he must take up the cross and bear the sins of the world. Therefore, he “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” With dedication and determination he began the journey to meet his appointment with destiny. He knew what was most important. Like a runner who is focused on the finish line or the end zone, Jesus was focused on where he needed to go. Nothing could move him away from accomplishing his purpose. We are the ones who are changed because Jesus would not alter his course.
The word picture of Jesus who “set his face” takes us back to Isaiah. In the section of Isaiah that describes the “suffering servant” we read in Isaiah 50:7 that the suffering servant said, “The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; he who vindicates me is near.” (NRSV) Jesus was becoming that Suffering Servant as he looked ahead to the cross. His compassion reached out to draw the entire world into his saving embrace.

Mercy for the Samaritans – James and John were not happy when the Samaritans did not receive Jesus and his party. Remember that good Jews would not have much good to say about Samaritans. So when they refuse to show hospitality, these brothers were ready to retaliate. They wanted to call down fire from heaven to destroy those who were not being supportive of them. Jesus rebuked them for the suggestion. His mercy and compassion were great – even to people who were not receiving him with hospitality.

Compassion is easy to share with those you like or with people who are helpless and therefore not hurtful to you. Compassion gets more radical when it is shared with people who reject you. On the cross Jesus offered forgiveness to those who were nailing him to that terrible place. On the way to Jerusalem, he refused to retaliate against those who rejected him. Do you start to see a radical pattern?

In what direction is your face set? It seems to make a difference in our lives concerning how we have set our faces. We can easily look around us and find people who are against us, who have done us wrong or who have become enemies to our causes. When we spend all of our time looking around us we can become distracted on our journey and our compassion can turn into anger, bitterness, and vengeance.

However, if we will set our faces to Jerusalem . . . if we will look to the cross as Jesus was doing, then compassion comes much easier for us. When we see what our Lord did for the entire world, then it is easier for us to deal with our Samaritans who repulse us today. When we eat of the bread of suffering and drink of the cup, then we have a better chance to keep our faces set on Jerusalem. When we make our way to the foot of the cross and keep our focus there, it is much harder to hate the Samaritans. Radical compassion begins to flow in our hearts when we set our faces to Jerusalem.

AT THE INTERSECTION . . . DON’T LOOK BACK

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (v. 62)

We have seen the pattern for four weeks now. At the very moment when we encounter some of the deepest expressions of the compassion of Jesus, we also hear his greatest words of challenge. The same is true in this story. Jesus and his friends went on down the road. There our Lord challenges three people who were impulsive and reluctant followers.
One man volunteered, “I will follow you wherever you go.” (v. 57) Jesus responded that to follow you must be willing to not even have a home, for “The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” (v. 58)

Jesus approached a second person with his simple invitation to discipleship, “Follow me.” The man replied as a good son would when he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” (v. 59) Then come some of the most challenging words of Jesus. He said, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (v. 60)

Finally, another man came to him and said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” (v. 61) He just wanted to tell his family “goodbye.” What is the harm in that? Jesus responded with a word that summarizes all of these challenging words: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” (v. 62) Just as someone who is plowing a field will never do a good job by looking back all of the time, so a disciple needs to avoid the danger of looking back.

Wow . . . now that is a challenge! That is a radical challenge. What can we make of these words? Notice that our Scripture passage began with Jesus’ “face set to go to Jerusalem.” Now it ends with a warning about looking back. There may be some lessons for us here.

**Faith always moves us into the future.** We read in Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Jesus is showing us by his example how to look forward by “setting your face.” He is also warning us of the dangers of seeing faith as something that allows us to look back. It is too easy for the things of yesterday to clutter our vision when we need to be looking ahead.

What are some of the things of yesterday that we need to leave behind in order for our faith to grow strong? Is failure something that causes you to look backward and miss out on the power of faith to move ahead? Or is it success that keeps you looking back? Is a past filled with sin something that has you looking over your shoulder? Or are you wrapped up in a smug pride that you are not like those other folks? We all have fragments of yesterday that wave at us as we look in the rear-view mirror of life. So where are you looking with your faith. Jesus is clear – set your face on the cross and do not look back!

**Faith always calls us to choose the best instead of the good.** The love of family is one of God’s wonderful good gifts. We should enjoy it and find our strength in family. In our day when we see the disintegration of so many families, this is even more desired. But Jesus did not say, “Seek ye first the love of your family.” Instead, he made the priority very clear when he said, “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matthew 6:33, KJV) Our commitment to God is what comes first – even more important than love of family. Now
that is challenging – that is radical. But that is what Jesus is saying to these three folks who encountered him along the road.

Fred Craddock is a preacher/teacher who wrote a commentary on Luke. His summary words about this passage may be helpful:

The radicality of Jesus’ words lies in his claim to priority over the best, not the worst, of human relationships. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil but to choose him over the family. And the remarkable thing is that those who have done so have been freed from possession and worship of family and have found the distance necessary to love them. (Fred Craddock, Interpretation Commentary, “Luke,” p. 144.)

Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. In doing so he gave up everything for us. His death on the cross was radical compassion. But this act is not something weird at the fringes of our faith. It is the very root of all that we believe. It is truly radical.

In the same way, Jesus challenges us to be radical in our faith. He wants us to give it up to him. C. S. Lewis stated this very well in his classic work, Mere Christianity:

Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours." (C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity (HarperOne, 2001), p. 196-197)

We live at the intersection of compassion and challenge. The One who has already demonstrated radical compassion on your behalf on a cross outside Jerusalem says to you the same thing that he said to the one on the road to Jerusalem. “Follow me.” No Excuses are needed – only a commitment to the radical challenge will do.

So, what is your answer?