

Is it just me, or does it seem like the world's going nuts
at an ever alarming pace?

Last week we were shell-shocked (and I would hope still are)
at the largest mass shooting in history
by an unstable person known to the FBI
who was able to buy military-grade weapons
in order to target our LGBT brothers and sisters.

Not on the same level, but still momentous,
is this week's surprise Brexit vote to leave the EU,
with implications that we and the rest of the world are
just beginning to fathom.

Here at home we're locked in an endless election season
with so much vitriol
that I can't imagine how we'll make it to November.

Now...what am I forgetting?
Oh yes, where I grew up in WV is suffering a
once-in-a-thousand years' flood.
My best friend had water in her house taller than I am.

This sad litany doesn't take into account other traumas
unfolding in the world,
and any personal burdens we carry with us today.
But the point is well-taken:
We come together in this beautiful place in need of succor and strength.

But what do we get in today's gospel?
Some of the most curt and cutting words ever spoken by Jesus!

Well, just as we're acutely aware of the world swirling around us,
so it helps to understand the context of Jesus' words.
They come at a turning point in Luke's gospel.
Twice in the first two sentences it says:
"Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem."

We know what happens in Jerusalem, don't we?
This is where Jesus will be cheered with "Hosannas"
and then jeered with "Crucify him!"
This is where Jesus will be tortured, hung on a cross and die.

So when people casually ask to follow Jesus there,
he makes sure they know what they're getting themselves into.
Are they really ready to take on a life of radical hospitality
and sacrificial love?
To reach out to the outcast, the vulnerable, those most difficult to love?
Do they have a clue as to what they're signing up for?

Jesus is actually doing them a favor with his sharp response.
He's warning them – buyer beware! – that following him
is not "a walk in the park".
It's a path of righteousness.
An often rocky path which demands our undivided attention.
Where the trail markings aren't always clear
and trust is our only compass.

That's the path Jesus is on as he sets "his face to go to Jerusalem".

And so when a stranger calls out to Jesus,
"I will follow you wherever you go" –
it's not such a stretch to think: "*Really?*"
No wonder Jesus answers with that saying about
foxes having holes and birds having nests.
Is this overzealous stranger really ready to follow One
who has no place to lay his head?
Who lives entirely *for others*?

And those other folks Jesus encounters on the way?
They have good reason not to drop everything and follow him,
burying their dead and saying their good-byes --
who could argue with that?

Well, maybe it's not what they say but *how* they say it:
"*Lord, first let me . . . First let me . . .*"
Right there, this belies that they don't know what it means to follow Jesus.

First? Well, following Jesus IS first. Following Jesus comes first.
It's an all-encompassing priority.
Everything we do on this life's path
is a chance to show the world we follow Jesus.

And that little word "me"?
Jesus' life shows us nothing if not that
it's not all about "me" (or you)
but about serving the neighbor.
It's about *us* – both within and way beyond these walls.

Jesus used a bit of hyperbole to make his point.
He didn't want to lead anyone astray,
but bring people together
to create a community that puts love into action.
A community of followers to uphold one another along the way.

So here's what I'd like to think happens.
You know the guy who wanted to wait and
bury his father before following Jesus?
I think it hit him – just in the nick of time – that he could do *both*.
He realized that Jesus will be to in every aspect of our lives.
So he decided to ask for the blessing of Jesus' presence at the burial.

This gave the last guy time to say his good-byes,
Now he was ready to follow Jesus without looking back.

Finally, that first guy who'd asked to follow Jesus?
He thought about what Jesus had said about those foxes and birds,
and decided that following Jesus was worth the risk.
So he caught up with Jesus,
and now the whole group set out for Jerusalem.

We know it wasn't easy when they got there.
They got scared. Got lost.
And even when Mary Magdalene and the other women
told them the great good news that Easter morning,
they didn't understand it at first.

Slowly, all the things Jesus had said and done began to make sense. They thought back to the day they'd first started following Jesus – how he warned them that it would require unwavering commitment and sacrificial love.

That holding fast to him would be their first and last priority.

So not only did they follow Jesus to Jerusalem, they kept following him -- even to the ends of the earth.

And that's pretty much how we got here together today, isn't it?

It's the witness of those early followers who've shown us how to follow Jesus through all the chances and changes of this mortal life, how to look to him in hope and hold fast, no matter what, hold fast to his healing love.

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