

## Herbert Charles Rule III

**Homily**     *One of a Kind*

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.” And 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.” And Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

The ninth chapter of the Gospel of Luke portrays the turning point in Jesus’ public ministry when we are told that he “set his face” toward Jerusalem, meaning that it was at this time that he determined with stern resolution to face the consequences waiting for him in the Holy City. He was not in the mood for, if you will excuse the expression, *lukewarm* commitment. “If any want to become my followers,” he said, “let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”

One person said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests;” Jesus responded. “But the Son of Man (referring to himself) has nowhere to lay his head.” “Lord, first let me go and bury my father,” said another. Famously, Jesus replied, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” A third person said, “... let me first say farewell to those at my home.” And that is when Jesus answered, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

For Jesus, when it came to the urgency of proclaiming and living out the gospel, it was all or nothing. All or nothing.

Herb Rule was an all or nothing kind of guy, which manifested itself in different ways. He was active in a group of men from our church who meet each Tuesday morning at 7:00. They call themselves MGM... Men’s Group Ministry. As you can imagine, not only did this group pray for Herb during his most recent health difficulties, but in his passing we talked about our friend, and shared stories about Herb. There are, after all, quite a few Herb Rule stories round these parts. It was Ben Johnson, a retired physician, who inspired the title of today’s homily when he

said that Herb was *one of a kind*.

Ben and his wife Nelda once played tennis with Herb and his then wife Beth. Afterwards, they went to the Rules' home for refreshments. Ben says Herb pulled out an unfiltered Lucky Strike, and rather than use a lighter, simply struck a match on the bottom side of the dining room table. "I've got to get to know this guy," Ben thought to himself. He did.

We all know what smoking can do to one's health, so it was not a surprise that shortly after, Herb asked Ben to be his personal cardiologist. In fact, during and after the pandemic, when our group provided the option of joining by Zoom, Herb would often tune in, sometimes in his car. He was the only person I've ever known who would light up while we talked about the meaning of the assigned scripture. Like Ben said, Herb was one of a kind.

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

At a very young age, Herb Rule put his hand to the proverbial plow and never looked back. Oh, that doesn't mean he didn't like to reminisce about the good old days. He loved talking about his youth... his time at Yale, singing in the infamous Yale musical group, the Whiffenpoofs, serving in the Marines, fighting the good fight. But his vision, his motivation, always found him looking progressively toward what was next around the corner. So in a real sense he put his hand to the plow and did not look back. And in the process of doing so he never apologized for his plowing. He did it his way. If there were those who disagreed with him – and there were not a few, as I'm sure you well know – he simply left them in his dust.

Jesus, who obviously knew something of the rural life, says that when a person is plowing a field, things do not go well when he looks behind while doing his plowing. You can only imagine how crooked would be the furrow when the one plowing does not keep his eyes fixed on where he is going. As one commentator puts it, "No one who has ever tried to plow a straight furrow can miss the point: the task requires a man's uninterrupted attention" (*Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8, p. 183).

When Herb put his hand to the plow, he did so with uninterrupted attention, and forged on with the singular purpose of making better the world in which he lived. I

have no doubt in my mind that in doing so he felt, in his own way, that he was indeed a vital part of – if not proclaiming – the kingdom of God.

Beth told me he had a “remarkable life of public service.” Herb did not view his way of life as so much politically-motivated – though there was that – but indeed saw it more as public service. Yes, he was twice elected to the Arkansas House of Representatives and ran for the U.S. Congress. But his years were also spent in such diverse activities as the Little Rock school board, Lyon College Board of Trustees, the Stewpot board. He was instrumental, while working in the Rose Law Firm, in securing the Freedom of Information Act, and supported the marriage equality movement, while also being a proponent of eliminating capital punishment.

After his graduation from Yale, he had the opportunity to attend a more prestigious law school, but came back to the U of A because this was home. He had passed the foreign service exam, and thought that might lead to his working in the area of intelligence, especially if he studied diplomacy law. But this was the early 60's. He wanted his beloved Arkansas to change, to be richer in diversity and tolerance, reflecting in a positive way the various cultures and colors represented in the populace. So there is the sense in which he put his hand to the Arkansas plow and did not look back.

Herb decided this early on as he witnessed what happened principally in the Central High desegregation era, from which he had a front row seat. He felt our community needed repairing and he was just the man to help get it done. He forged relationships with those who shared his vision, if for no other reason than there was simply too much work to be accomplished by one person alone. In doing so, he was convinced that everything he did was the right way, and more often than not, the *only* right way.

In that sense, as Chris puts it, he was “impervious to correction.” Admittedly, he was not good at taking advice, and toward the end of his life, even though he knew his health was failing, clung tenaciously to the final goal of being cussedly independent. As a political person and lawyer, he knew how to negotiate and in some cases compromise. But there were those times when he was not what you would call *malleable*. I once heard someone say, “You know, I’m not always right, but when I’m right, by golly, I’m right.” That was Herb Rule. He was one of a kind.

As was true of Jesus, there was a sense of urgency to everything Herb did. If you are unfamiliar with the passage we read earlier from Luke's gospel, you might have been a bit taken aback by it. Jesus' demands of his would-be followers seems to be too rigid, too strict. After all, what's wrong with a man wanting to go and bury his father? Why would Jesus take exception to the one who wanted to say goodbye to his family?

Maybe these people had not yet caught Jesus' sense of urgency. He knows that he is on the way to Jerusalem, there to die on a cross. It would not be an ordinary death, but one that would literally change the world. Jesus doesn't have much time left, while some of his disciples think they have all the time in the world to spend with their Teacher. But he knows better. For Jesus it is now or never. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." There is no time for looking back.

As a follower of Jesus, that doesn't mean that Herb Rule was all business all the time. He had a regular game of tennis at least twice a week. He played golf, albeit with ancient clubs. He was struggling with his game one day and Nick suggested that he might try a new set of clubs. After all, there were plenty on the market that were "forgiving" for seniors like himself. Herb's response? "I'm not a senior anything."

He was involved in music and the arts, to the point that he put his money where his mouth was, creating an endowment here at Second Presbyterian and at Wildwood that funds music scholarships. He did it, if for no other reason than he loved music and anyone who sought to excel at it. Facebook friends have posted some interesting pictures of Herb in costume, in the Gridiron Show and at other venues. If you've seen those pictures, or saw Herb perform, you know he obviously wasn't afraid to laugh at himself... or others, for that matter.

Herb loved Second Presbyterian, was a longtime member of our church's choir, and had musical tastes that spanned the classical to old-fashioned gospel. In fact, he never returned that Baptist hymnal I loaned him. He had this plan, you see, to have a good old gospel singing here at our church. A gospel singing at *Second Presbyterian*! Imagine that.

To be honest, Herb Rule was not everybody's cup of tea. He did, over the course of his career, leave a few bodies in his wake, so to speak. But please hear this, if you will. What distinguishes the disciples of Jesus from the wannabes is that when

Jesus says, “Follow me,” they made no excuses. They followed – immediately and without reservation – ready to do the impossible because the mission was so urgent. They may not have been perfect in their doing of it – there was still plenty of doubt represented in their ranks – but still, they were committed to the task.

In his own way, Herb Rule was a disciple of Jesus; a flawed disciple of Jesus, as are all of us who claim to be Christian. But I don’t think it can be denied that he did this: he put his hand to the plow and never looked back. And neither should we. Neither should we. Not if we want, like Herb, to be one of a kind.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.