

Sunday, June 30, 2019

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8 (Year C)

1 Kings 19.15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5.1, 13-25; Luke 9.51-62

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As we begin this summer season, many of us are probably looking forward to plans for summer vacation. We all know how much work goes into planning and preparing for travel. There is always so much to do. Making travel arrangements, planning activities, arranging for pet sitters, stopping the paper and the mail delivery, making sure that bills will be covered during our absence. The to do list seems endless. Too much to do and not enough time to get it all done before the vacation begins.

There is something of that going on in today's Gospel reading. Only, it is not a summer vacation Jesus is embarking on. What we just heard is the beginning of a new section in Luke's Gospel. Sometimes referred to as the "travel narrative," this is the longest section of Luke's Gospel, spanning ten chapters. It is at this point that Jesus "sets his face toward Jerusalem," where he will be "taken up." Where he will be arrested, put on trial, tortured, and executed. This "travel narrative" is characterized by a strong sense of purpose and urgency. Not just the sense of purpose and the urgency of Jesus needing to get to Jerusalem to fulfil his mission and his destiny. There is also a strong sense of purpose and urgency because there is so much to be done in Jesus' short time left. Not the least of which is intensive teaching and training of his disciples. Preparing them for the real work that will begin after he is gone. Jesus is unwavering in his commitment to his mission to go to Jerusalem, and he calls his disciples to a similar unwavering commitment to their mission—to continue the ministry he began.

No sooner do Jesus and his disciples set out, traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem—taking the most direct route, which passes through Samaritan territory—than they encounter resistance. Because of theological differences between Jews and Samaritans, the locals are resistant to Jesus precisely because he is heading to Jerusalem. The Samaritans do not recognize Jerusalem as the center of true worship, but rather, Mount Gerizim. As a result, pilgrims to Jerusalem were not welcomed. James and John, also known as the "Sons of Thunder"—and here we see their thunder-like qualities—want to "command fire to come down from heaven and consume" the Samaritans. Jesus' response to rejection, is not retribution, but forgiveness. And his response to James' and John's misguided offer is to rebuke them. Have they learned nothing in their time with Jesus? Looks like some heavy-duty education in discipleship is in order. Not just learning the Gospel, but actually living it.

And the opportunity to educate the disciples on what it truly means to be one of Jesus' followers comes very quickly. As Jesus and the disciples are continuing on their way, Jesus is approached by three people seeking to follow him. And to each he provides a different response, based on how the would-be disciples approach the subject.

The first is all enthusiastic. He says, "I will follow you wherever you go." Are you sure about that? Wherever? Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus is saying that he has no permanent home. He travels wherever he is needed, wherever God calls him to go. While Jesus does not advocate or

model an ascetic lifestyle, he does effectively renounce worldly security that is symbolized by “home” and any of his followers would be called to do likewise. Does that mean that all who are called to be Jesus’ followers are to be homeless, to give up all worldly possessions? Of course not. What Jesus is really saying, what he is modeling by giving up worldly security, is that those who follow him are to be open to God’s calling, wherever it takes them and to not get hung up on, become overly attached to, what secular society views as, security.

The second would-be disciple, invited by Jesus to follow him, is willing to do so, but wants to delay. He needs to perform the proper burial rituals for his father. Then he will be ready. “But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’” In his seemingly harsh response, Jesus is implying that those who do not hear Jesus’ words and share in the new life of the Kingdom are already spiritually dead. But those who are spiritually alive, those who seek to follow Jesus, must heed the call to God’s service now, without hesitation, and that they must begin proclaiming the Gospel now, without hesitation. There will always be something that competes for our attention. So rather than delay, just do it.

The third would-be disciple says he will follow Jesus but also has an excuse for delaying. He wants to go and say goodbye to his family and friends. To which Jesus responds, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” If someone begins plowing a field and then looks back, they lose control of the plow, resulting in furrows that meander. It is not possible to look back and end up with straight furrows. What Jesus is saying is that when one makes a commitment to follow him, they are committing to look ahead with single-minded resolve to the future Kingdom of God and not to looking back to the past. They are committing to a new life and to continually move forward along that new path. It’s not that the past is bad. It’s just that if we continue focusing on the past, we cannot move forward.

The common theme in Jesus’ response to all three would-be disciples is that anyone who desires and seeks to serve Christ must totally surrender themselves to His mission and ministry. And they must be willing to do so with undivided heart and with undivided loyalty.

All of this is remarkably similar to the calling of Elisha in today’s Old Testament reading from First Kings. When Elijah calls Elisha to be his successor as Prophet, Elisha hesitates. “Sure, I’ll do it, but I have some things to take care of first.” Elijah questions whether Elisha is truly able to put his other obligations aside and to wholeheartedly commit to his new calling. But Elisha demonstrates that he is indeed committed by slaughtering the oxen, cooking the meat, and serving it to the people, thereby providing a sacramental sign of his acceptance of Elijah’s call and Elisha’s breaking with his former life.

In both First Kings and Luke, the would-be servants of God are faced with a definite departure from the lives they had lived. All are naturally hesitant. One of the critical aspects of answering God’s call is confronting and dealing with those hesitations, thereby freeing oneself to fully commit to the calling and to fully engage in the work of the Gospel.

Paula Franck, an Episcopal layperson and expert in Christian formation, provides an illustration:

There is a story about a farmer's chicken who proposed to the cow that they make breakfast for the farmer. The cow cheerfully responded, "Great! What will we give him?" The chicken replied, "I'll supply the eggs and you supply the meat." The cow's countenance dropped as she realized the ramifications of what she had agreed to. She sadly replied to the chicken: "For you that's devotion, but for me it means total sacrifice." And she walked away.

Franck then offers this follow-up:

This barnyard fable can serve to throw light on Jesus' interactions with the three potential disciples in today's Gospel. They too were seemingly prepared to respond to an invitation; but, like the cow, they were stopped in their tracks when confronted with the full measure of the demands of discipleship. How could they be expected to respond to Jesus' call without excuse, delay, or hesitation; without consulting family or colleagues . . . The decision to follow Jesus cannot be forced on others, inherited, or manipulated. To answer the call to "follow me" is to yield ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord, to follow in trust his leading us into situations of service beyond our imagination. You don't learn discipleship by studying it—at some point you just have to do it. (Paula Franck, *Synthesis*, Proper 8, 6/30/19)

No doubt about it, this can be a struggle. Paul addresses this in his letter to the Galatians. He characterizes struggle between following Jesus and following our own wishes and desires as an exercise of freedom. As an exercise that ultimately leads to freedom. That true freedom is to be found in how we respond to our particular circumstances. That we are not to give in to the desires of the flesh, but instead to be open to the desires of the Spirit. For Paul, "flesh" means focusing on the survival of the self. By "Spirit," Paul means being open to the power of God available through the risen Christ. When we choose to follow Christ, when we are baptized, our lives are radically changed. We shift our focus from concern for self to concern for the other. For Paul, it is all summed up in a single commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which Christ himself exemplified and made the center of his ministry. A commandment we fulfill not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but out of genuine love for neighbor and our love for God. It is in living this law of love that brings true freedom.

The Rev. Dr. Joanna Adams (a Presbyterian pastor) writes, "To be free really means to be liberated from the prison of 'me, myself, and I.' To be truly free is to be able to move beyond the self and . . . to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. To be free is to be free for responsibility, not from responsibility. [Think of] Christ Jesus, who had everything in the world going for himself—power, status, safety—how he chose, freely chose to empty himself and take on the form of a servant for the sake of the world. Now that is freedom" (quoted in *Synthesis*, Proper 8, 6/30/19, emphasis mine).

We are not told how each of the three would-be disciples in today's Gospel responds. This is undoubtedly by design, leaving it to the future hearers of these words, leaving it to future would-be disciples, to have the freedom to make their own considered response to Jesus' call to unwavering discipleship. As those who are called by our Lord to be his disciples, the choice of how to respond is yours.