

Sunday, June 26, 2022

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 8 (Year C)

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

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1704565433217999>

(Sermon begins at about 20:55)

“Commitment and Resolve”

Our Gospel reading for today opens by telling us that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This is a transition point for Jesus. Thus far, he has been traveling throughout Galilee preaching, teaching, and healing. That he “set his face to go to Jerusalem” is a term that is often used to describe a shift in focus to his ultimate destiny—to his crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension—which will occur in Jerusalem. This change in focus does not mean that he ceases to preach, teach, and heal. That will continue until his dying day, and beyond. But this is the point where the trajectory of Jesus’ ministry begins to take turns that will be necessary to accomplish his mission. Setting his face to go to Jerusalem entails multiple turns. A geographic turn, as he begins to slowly work his way south toward Jerusalem. A theological turn, as he slowly, sometimes subtly, seeks to expand the circle of those whom he ministers to, of those who are included in God’s kingdom—expanding beyond his initial Jewish-centered audience to include Gentiles as well. And a programmatic turn, as he begins to focus more on the education and formation of his disciples, preparing them for the time when they will be called upon to take up his mantle. It is this latter turn that is of particular concern to us, not only today, but throughout the remainder of this season after Pentecost, where we walk alongside Jesus, learning from him as he makes his way to Jerusalem. As he prepares his disciples—and us—for what is to come.

The theme of the day, particularly in our reading from the Gospel according to Luke, with support from our other Scripture readings, is one of commitment and resolve. This is particularly illustrated by what happens following a particularly tense situation in a Samaritan village where the locals were inhospitable—a social taboo at the time—and the disciples’ knee-jerk reaction to respond in-kind by wanting to “command fire to come down from heaven and consume” the Samaritans. Given the differences between Samaritans and Jews, what this really amounts to is a case of religious intolerance. But Jesus will have none of that and, rather, continues on his way.

After leaving the Samaritan village, Jesus encounters three people along the road. Each one seeks to follow him. In the interest of gaining new disciples, Jesus could have painted a rosy picture of what following him entails. “Our life is great! We get to travel around the countryside, seeing different places, meeting all sorts of really interesting people. We have plenty of opportunities to help people out, teaching, feeding, and healing. It’s very rewarding work and the people are so appreciative of what we do for them.” Not that this isn’t true. But instead, he is upfront and tells it like it is. Providing a sobering picture of what following Jesus is about. Not only in his own time, but even for future generations of followers, including us.

To the first man who professes, “I will follow you wherever you go,” Jesus responds, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” A frank statement that the life of ministry that following Jesus entails is not all nice and cushy. Jesus is pointing to his own life of itinerancy. Not having a permanent home, going wherever the job takes him. While that may have been the case for Jesus and his disciples, that literal sense of having no place to lay one’s head has not been the norm for those who came after him. Yes, there were, and still are, some who are called to that life of itinerancy, such as Franciscan friars and, to an extent, some other monastics. Of course, in its literal sense, that is not practical for everyone who follows Jesus, at least not in our own time. But the principle prevails, nonetheless. That to truly follow Jesus means going wherever the path may lead. To do ministry wherever one is called to do so. Not necessarily involving physical relocation to perform ministry as much as having an attitude of openness to where and how one does ministry. To be open to possibilities and opportunities for ministry when they present themselves, as opposed to getting locked into a particular view of what ministry looks like. To be open to changing what and how one does ministry based on the needs presented, not based on preconceived ideas. To be flexible. To be obedient to God calls.

We see this same principle at play in our Old Testament reading from First Kings. Elisha is minding his own business, plowing his family fields. Unbeknownst to him, God has identified him to be successor to the prophet Elijah. Then, along comes Elijah. Without saying a word, he throws his mantle—the cloak or stole that is the sign of his prophetic office—over Elisha. A sacramental act commissioning and passing Elijah’s prophetic authority to Elisha. Elisha understands the significance of what has just happened, and follows Elijah, no questions asked. He recognizes that God has called him into service, and he will dutifully obey, no matter where that may lead him.

Back in our Gospel reading, Jesus invites a second man to follow him. He responds by saying, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” To which Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” A seemingly harsh response. Although, as typical of Jesus, this is likely hyperbole for purposes of emphasizing his point. Yet, the underlying message is clear and applicable, not only to Jesus’ time, but also to our own. When one chooses to follow Jesus, society’s ways of doing things do not always apply. Following Jesus means that Jesus’ values and priorities trump everything else. The priority is living according to Jesus’ values, which are exemplified by ministering in his name, even when it might be inconvenient or uncomfortable to do so.

We see this emphasized in our Epistle reading from the Letter to the Galatians. Here, Paul talks about the “works of the flesh.” Living a life solely focused on physical desires and survival of the self. Being concerned with one’s own interests, doing whatever one wants, to the exclusion of anything else. Paul posits that the antidote to living in this manner, the preferred way of living from a Christian perspective, is to “live by the Spirit.” To allow God’s values and priorities to be our guide and motivation. It is living in this way, in accordance with Christian values and priorities, by which the power of God is made available to the believer through the risen Christ. While this may be difficult at times, living as Christ calls us to has the benefit of producing within the believer the fruit of the Spirit, manifest in nine ways: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul concludes this passage by saying, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” That we have a choice in how we live. We have a choice to follow our own self-centered passions and desires, or to follow Christ’s values and priorities. The latter producing fruit that is far more beneficial and satisfying in the life of the believer.

Back in our Gospel reading, Jesus invites a third man, who responds, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Certainly a reasonable request. In fact, one that Elijah allows Elisha to fulfill in that particular call narrative. But here, Jesus’ response, again, seems a bit harsh: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” Not that Jesus is forbidding him from saying good-bye to his family. In fact, it is commendable that the man is willing to leave his family to follow Jesus. What Jesus is really saying is that following him means always looking forward, not backward. The past is exactly that. It does little good to dwell on the past. Those who follow Jesus are a people of hope in what is to come, a people of vision. We have hope in his promises and a vision for how we can work toward that reality in our own time. That is what we are working toward when we choose to follow Jesus. To continually move forward.

Note that the latter two men have excuses for delaying. In his responses, Jesus indicates that nothing should interfere with one’s call to proclaim the kingdom, to following him. Jesus does not ask anything of his would-be followers that he is not willing to do himself. Him turning his face toward Jerusalem, even knowing how that will end, is a profound sign of his own commitment to God’s mission. In fact, knowing that his end is coming, Jesus strengthens his resolve and his commitment to his mission. Even as he turns his face to go to Jerusalem, he chooses to follow a route that will push the boundaries of his ministry and his influence into Samaritan and Gentile territory. Further expanding the kingdom, even as his own time draws closer to an end. This strengthened resolve and commitment on Jesus’ part is indicative of what he is asking of the three who seek to follow him. Indicative of what he asks of any of us who seek to follow him. That they—that we—are “all in,” totally committed to the cause.

One commentator summarizes the purpose of today’s Gospel reading beautifully. “Taken together . . . these three warnings portray discipleship as a striking contrast to conventional, ordinary life: not nestled at home, but on the move through the neighborhood; not bogged down in common duties, but on the move and proclaiming God’s reign; not looking backward to the entanglements of the past . . . but on the move, opening up, and looking ahead.”¹

In our Gospel reading, we are not told how the three men respond to Jesus’ invitation to follow him and to the caveats provided. Whether they follow or not. And if they do follow, whether they do so cheerfully or reluctantly. Perhaps this is by design. That this passage is not about what these three men choose. Rather, it serves as an invitation to those of us reading this Gospel story to discern for ourselves how to respond. Let us heed Jesus’ invitation and set our own faces toward Jerusalem. An expression and a sign of our own commitment to what and who God has called us to be in this place and at this time.

¹ “On the Move: SALT’s Commentary for Third Week after Pentecost,” SALT Project, June 22, 2022.
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2022/6/22/on-the-move-salts-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>.