

Sunday June 30th, 2019
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

PRAYER: O God, we have rejoiced in the stories of your faithfulness. We pray that you will so increase the hearing of our ears, the perception of our eyes, the compassion of our hearts, and the willingness of our hands, that stories of our faithfulness might reach your ears, and you, too, might rejoice. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: “Don’t store up treasures here on earth, where they can be eaten by moths and get rusty, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven, where they will never become moth-eaten or rusty and where they will be safe from thieves. Wherever your treasure is, there your heart and thoughts will be.” (Matthew 6:19-21)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION: God of freedom, set at liberty we who are captive, and grant us forgiveness as we confess our sin. As prisoners of self-interest, we disregard neighbours. We bolster our own egos at other’s expense. When slander is rampant, we seldom stop it. When rumours are rife, we seek not the source. Help us to check our destructive ways, lest we consume one another in hatred. Help us to use the freedom you gave us in loving ways to honour you and each other. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.” We who “belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” Therefore, let us live in love and bear one another’s burdens, in the assurance that we are forgiven and made alive in the Spirit.

PASTORAL PRAYER: O God of the gracious word and mighty deeds, we thank you for granting us your loving presence every moment of our lives. Your presence has been the source of life and faith from the day of our birth, and for countless generations who have gone before us, but how fickle we humans are. How quick we are to set aside the source of life for empty promises and fleeting hope. Long ago when the Israelites threatened to trade allegiance to you for alien gods, you sent inspired prophets to warn of the dangers of idolatry. When the powerful began to exploit the weak, you raised up lawgivers to proclaim the demands of justice. How the people chaffed at your discipline and judgment even though it was for their own good. Thank you, loving God, that even when we protest about your ever-watchful eye focused on us, you will never leave us alone.

Despite our knowledge of your watchfulness, O God, we like our ancestors confuse your presence with alien deities. We pretend to attribute ungracious words to your mouth. We ascribe deeds to your hand that are less than noble. We try to turn our enemies into your enemies, seeking to put our sword into your hand. We pillage the land for our own use all the while declaring ownership transferred from you. We justify preferential treatment of us, claiming your hatred of others different from ourselves. Shamelessly, we identify our passions with yours, shrinking your compassion to the size of ours.

O God, forgive our indulgence in the works of the flesh that Christ was crucified for, and forgive our crucifixion of the works of the spirit that Christ sought to initiate.

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Let us never forget that the freedom for which Christ set us free is not the freedom to become masters but the freedom through love to become servants.

Help us, O God, to become faithful servants-servants who will inspire others to heed your summons without hesitation; servants who will make a difference in the world as in the church. Let us, as when we first believed, put our hand to the plow and, without looking back, use our freedom to multiply the fruits of your spirit.

BENEDICTION: O people set your face steadfastly toward the world. Greet the call of Christ not with an excuse but with enthusiasm that your faithfulness might testify to the faithfulness of God.

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Luke 9:51-62
“Facing the Inevitable”

There was a young man who walked into a corner store in the US with a shotgun and demanded all the money from the cash drawer. The clerk quickly put all the cash in the drawer into a bag and handed it to the robber. Then the robber saw a bottle of scotch that he wanted on the shelf behind the cashier. He told the cashier to put it in the bag as well, but the cashier refused saying the man didn't look like he was over twenty-one.

The robber claimed he was, but the clerk refused to give it to him because he did not believe him. The robber then took out his driver's license and handed it to the clerk, who carefully looked it over. Then he declared that indeed he was over 21 and he put the bottle in the bag and the robber fled. The cashier promptly, phoned the police and gave them the address of the man who had robbed the store. He was arrested in under two hours. (1002 Humorous Illustrations, p.188)

“The best laid plans” can easily go awry. There was a travel plan that went south that was the experience of Bret and Christine Lauritzen of Tacoma Washington, who made a visit to Miami Florida. Christine actually ended up filing a lawsuit against her husband Bret for failing to follow her directions she gave him from the tourist map. I hope I am not giving any wives ideas for when their husbands fail to heed their directions.

Christine's claim was that because Bret had failed to heed her advice, they ended up in a very bad part of town where they were mugged and where she received an arm injury from the mugging. Christine claimed negligence on her husband's part that led to her injury. I wonder what kind of wedding anniversary experience they had after all this. Perhaps you've experienced something like the following; actually, I really hope you haven't.

While on a flight from Zurich to Gatwick in 1991, passengers listened in horror as a stewardess was heard to declare over the P.A. system that their plane was about to ditch in the sea. A number of passengers quickly donned their life jackets and hunched in the crash position preparing for the impact when the captain came on to apologize. The plane was not in trouble. The stewardess had hit the wrong recorded message and meant to play, “We are about to serve the duty frees”.

Missed flights, horror stories at customs, traffic jams, accidents, lost luggage, misread maps and a whole host of others things: can go wrong when we travel. We've all had these difficulties and that is why we have travel insurance, and belong to automobile clubs. We all prepare to travel with the thought always in our minds, “What if”. Now you would think that the Son of God would surely have an easier time traveling than most people, especially when except for one recorded trip on a donkey and a boat trip or two, he walked everywhere.

What we see instead, is that Jesus had anything but an easy journey. He faced the excitable crowds, hunger, had to sleep outdoors, dirty feet, disgruntled disciples, storms at sea which we see lead to a lack of sleep and all kinds of other problems.

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And then to top it off, when Jesus finally arrives at his destination, Jerusalem, he gets crucified. Lost luggage doesn't sound so bad now does it? Walking with Jesus is not a picnic. It is incredibly difficult and challenging. This is the first point that Luke is trying to make in our gospel lesson today. Luke 9:51 is a very important moment in the Gospel of Luke.

The verse tells us that Jesus' time on earth was drawing to an end, and he set his face, or determined to head to Jerusalem. Although scholars struggle with trying to follow Jesus' exact geographical movements on his way to Jerusalem accurately, at least as Luke records them, we know at this moment where he is heading.

All of us when planning any kind of trip usually begin with a decision about where we are going. Only when we know where we are going, can we begin other preparations about how, when, and who we are going to travel with. No one packs their suitcase and renews their passport without knowing where they are headed. Jerusalem is Jesus' place of destiny; it is his land of promise, if we borrow from Exodus.

And just like when we sometimes plan a trip, there might be someone who asks, "Why would you want to go there?" For example, I might say that to you if you are planning to go to Mexico right now, or Syria, or Afghanistan. Going there, I believe, is very risky. Jesus then encounters some very serious opposition to his journey from an unusual source. Not Pharisees or Sadducees this time, but from people who live in a Samaritan village.

Their refusal to be hospitable to Jesus is all about his destination. Jews and Samaritans did not care for each other at all. For the Samaritans, Jerusalem was not the place to go for anyone, let alone the Messiah. Mt. Gerizim was the place of real significance for a religious pilgrimage. "Why would you want to go there?" these Samaritan's ask. Jesus' movement to Jerusalem was seen by the Samaritans to be insensitive and a rejection of their beliefs, when in actual fact Jesus was just being true to his calling and destiny.

Nothing was going to distract Jesus from his destiny, but it did raise in James and John a heated reaction, didn't it? They wanted to call down fire and consume the village. Jesus, however, rebuked James and John, making it clear that zealous punishment of those who reject Jesus and his mission, is not on his agenda, nor will it ever be. Instead they simply went on to another village that welcomed them.

Jesus' own journey to Jerusalem, and the cross, was a difficult one, and that's Luke's first point here, but his second point is directed at us. In this difficult and challenging journey of destiny that Jesus is on, he calls all of us to join him. The call of discipleship to all people is a major theme of Luke's gospel, and in this passage, we are reminded that we are not permitted to follow Jesus with qualifiers. What I mean by that is that we are not permitted to set our own terms for following Jesus.

Following Jesus is not like buying a car where you negotiate for the best price and the options you want. Following Jesus is more akin to a "take or leave it" situation.

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I believe that in my reading of the scriptures, more people actually turned away from Jesus than followed him. This is certainly the case when he reaches Jerusalem. Hundreds of people who had heard his teaching, and ate the multiplied fish and bread, now call for his crucifixion.

Most people today turn away from Jesus, because his call is all encompassing of our whole being. We want to give little parts of ourselves to the call of discipleship, but not everything. Luke introduces us to three individuals who represent probably thousands, maybe millions of people from that moment until now, who were not prepared to follow on Jesus' terms.

The first person we meet is very enthusiastic. "I will follow you no matter where you go." Fantastic, but Jesus reminds him of the true nature of following him. "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but I, the Son of Man, have no home of my own, not even a place to lay my head." The reality is, following Jesus is no Carnival cruise. Rev. Clint Mix, former Director of Congregational Health for the CBOQ, gave a seminar I attended a few years back at the Baptist Assembly and he made a very good point.

Most people choose a church like they choose a cruise ship. They ask questions like, do they like the accommodations? Is the staff looking after my needs? Is the captain or pastor competent and personable? Am I comfortable etc.? What we should be doing is seeing our church as more of a coast guard ship. Do we have a mission? Do we train ourselves? Are we willing to risk everything to rescue someone?

On a rescue ship, comfort is irrelevant but the mission is paramount. The American Coast Guard has a saying. "You do not have to come back, but you do have to go out."

Truly following Jesus is: risky, sacrificial, uncomfortable, and challenging. The second man came to Jesus and wanted to follow but he states, "Lord, let me return home and bury my father." This man wanted to set some conditions on following Jesus. His father is not yet dead. What he is saying is that he feels he needs to honour his family ties first, before Jesus. Jesus sweeps this away by making clear that his duty is to go and preach the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The theme of family getting in the way of a greater mission is very common in modern media. One recent example comes from the Pixar movie *The Incredibles* about a group of superheroes forced into everyday life because of numerous lawsuits. Frozone is a superhero who is capable of creating ice and snow from the air around him. In one scene he is washing his face in his apartment, when a giant robot rampages past his window.

After digging through a drawer, he pulls out a special remote and activates the hiding place of his superhero costume, but the costume is missing. "Honey!" he cries, looking down the hall. "Where's my super suit?" "What?" his wife answers, sounding somewhat guilty. "Where is my super suit?" Frozone repeats, as a helicopter crashes down behind him.

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“I...us...put it away,” his wife calls back. “Why do you need to know?” “I need it!” Frozone answers, beginning to frantically search the room. “Uh uh,” his wife chides, “Don’t you think about runnin’ off to do no derring-do. We’ve been planning this dinner for two months.” “But the public is in danger!” “My evening is in danger,” his wife responds.

Unable to stand it any longer Frozone bursts out: “You tell me where my suit is, woman! We are talking the greater good.” “Greater good?” she replies. “I am your wife. I’m the greatest good you are ever gonna get!” Sighing, Frozone slumps against the wall and shakes his head. (Pixar’s: *The Incredibles*, 2004) As hard as it is to accept, in Jesus’ travel group, family ties take a back seat. He calls us to not the greater good but the greatest good, namely following him without reservation.

The third man Jesus encounters also wants to follow Jesus but he first wants to go and say goodbye to his family. It sounds like a reasonable request. In fact, in 1 Kings 19 Elijah calls Elisha to become a prophet. And the first thing Elisha wants to do is go and say good bye to his parents, which Elijah permits. Jesus however, will have none of it. “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.”

When you plow a field, you have to keep your eyes forward, focusing on your goal. If you look back your furrow gets all messed up, going every which way. When you commit to following Jesus, your past and your former family ties all get sacrificed. This may be the hardest thing of all for us to overcome. “Blood is thicker than water”. Family is important and valued and desired. The temptation to look back is powerful.

The solution is also powerful: bring your family along. Have them place their hand on the plow with you, so you can co-labour with Christ. Tie your affections for family and Christ together, so that when sacrifices are made, your family will understand and even be supportive. The issue remains that we cannot qualify our discipleship. There are no caveats, not exclusions, no exemptions, no special treatments, other than our Lord’s gracious love extended to all.

C.S. Lewis always seems to have the right words to sum things up.

In *Mere Christianity* he writes,

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 of a branch here and branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don’t want to drill the tooth, 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 life instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours.” (Mere Christianity, p. 196-197-HarperOne 2001)

The issue is always the same, it seems to me. We want Jesus, but let us be honest; we want him on our terms.

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Use any idiom or expression you like, such as “I want Jesus to fit into my box”, but the result is the same; I want to mold Jesus into my idea of a Saviour and Lord. We might like or even love a great deal about Jesus, but there is always something that rubs us the wrong way, even offends us.

We would rather just skip over the tough bits of discipleship and move on, but Jesus won't let us. Our highest achievement in discipleship is not our personal comfort, or convenience, it is following without reservation.

Did you know that from time to time, usually annually, crabs and lobsters have to leave their shells in order to grow. We all know that these animals need their shells to protect them, yet when they grow, they have to shed the old shells. If they did not shed their shells the old shells would become their prison-and finally their casket. In other words, they must shed or die.

The tricky part for these crustaceans is the brief period of time between when the old shell is discarded, and the new one is formed. During this period of time they are terrible vulnerable and one can guess that this transition from old to new must be very scary. The currents can toss them against hard coral, and hungry fish know instinctively the time of year when crabs and lobsters shed. You can imagine that for a while, at least, the old shell must seem pretty good: so safe, so secure and so familiar.

But to not change, to not shed the old shell is to invite death. We are not so unlike these crustaceans. To change and grow we too have to sometimes shed our old shells. Our shells might be a familiar structure, a framework, a relationship, a habit, or something we've depended on for our security. Discipleship means being so committed to Christ that when he bids us to follow, we will change, risk, and leave our old shells behind.

What excuse is holding you back? What old “shell” is keeping you from changing? What ties have to be cut? All so you can truly follow Christ. Are you fit for the Kingdom of God? If not then stop looking back and start looking forward to the opportunities and challenges our Lord presents to us. Then Jesus can look at us and finally say, “They finally got it.”