

The Sixth
Sunday after
Pentecost
David
Baylor

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“Commitment and Distraction”

David Baylor

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

Ps. 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Some of you may be amused – and others amazed – that after 48 years plus of marriage to The Lady Marjorie, I’ve recently begun to take more responsibility for meal planning and cooking. This was long overdue, as I think Marge will attest, since she bore the burden of menu planning and meal preparation for whatever came to the table for our family of two, then four, and now two again for almost all of the last five decades.

In my own [weak] defense, I have been known to arrange for an occasional pizza, or fetch burgers and fries from Kidd Valley now and then. And once in a while I’ve even made Marge’s favorite thing for dinner: reservations. But honestly, married to a former home ec teacher (some of you won’t even know what that is) who is a truly excellent cook, I couldn’t see why I shouldn’t just let her keep on doing what she did so well and appeared to enjoy!

But I started becoming energized about cooking after reading Bob Spitz’ excellent biography of Julia Child last fall, and finally accepting the fairness of Marge’s long-suffering encouragement for a more balanced division of labor in retirement, I’m now elbow deep in portion size and prep timing and the like. And I’m enjoying it, and by and large (and large seems to be where the portion sizes are falling so far), it seems to be working out.

So with ingredients and prep time occupying more of my mental hard drive these days, cooking metaphors and analogies have crept into other areas of my life. Thus, I suggest that one of the best ways to characterize today’s readings is to point out that there’s a lot of meat in this particularly hearty stew of lections.

And the choicest bit by far is the very last bite, the one that just concluded the Gospel. But there is a problem with this particular morsel, however, because it’s also the hardest to chew. In fact, some of us may actually choke on it!

Let’s hear it again: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Clearly another of those Difficult Sayings of Jesus we regularly encounter throughout the Gospels. And this one brings me face to face again with the question of my own fitness for the kingdom of God. I think many of us thought we’d worked out a lot of this already, but this pronouncement of Jesus calls to question whether we’ve ever really put our hand to the plow in fully committing to his call, or whether we are instead choosing to look back and to allow ourselves to be distracted from answering that call with the abandonment required. In the end, the implications of this for my own spiritual situation are, at the least, confusing, frustrating and depressing. At its worst, it leaves me feeling a little hopeless.

All is not lost, however, and we’ll return to this momentarily.

The crux of all we are hearing today is found in two key things: (1) the meaning of Jesus “setting his face to Jerusalem”, and (2) the question of our own commitment to following Jesus all the way to and through Jerusalem – in other words, our discipleship, and our understanding of the cost this discipleship now and in the future.

One commentary I sat with this past week describes this portion of Luke as “...a powerful description of a man whose life knew meaning and purpose in a way ... not been excelled by any other life before or after.” The words “...he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” (9:51) offers a graphic expression of “...the resolution, fortitude, and determination of Jesus who having ‘put his hand to the plow’ was not about to look back.”[1]

“The purpose of his life was focusing in upon Jerusalem and all the terrible meaning of that city for him and the kingdom of God which he preached. That which Jesus was doing, his growing experience on the road, and his attitude toward his looming passion, all reinforced the meaning of his life and approaching death.”[1]

Because this “setting his face to Jerusalem” is so central to today’s Gospel (and to other parts of Luke and other Gospels as well), we should “unpack” this a little. Today, of course, we know what was special about that Jerusalem, what would eventually happen there, and what it would ultimately mean for all of us and for the world.

The writer of this Gospel understood this, too, in retrospect, but the full significance was largely unknown to the disciples at the time. If anything, most of them probably assumed that Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem to establish a literal, physical, and temporal kingship, to somehow supplant both the Hebrew and the Roman authorities. In this regard, then, they were probably as clueless about the real significance of Jerusalem to Jesus and his ministry as we have sometimes seen them in other things.

But while Jerusalem is indeed a literal, geographical, and temporal place, “In the Bible it [also] stands as a symbol, as the place of our salvation; it’s the place where we finally understand what Jesus is doing.” [2] In fact, in Revelation, “...we are told about a New Jerusalem where God’s reign is clear, where all creation is restored, and where there are no more tears. So Jerusalem is [for us] a symbol of that place in time when you join heaven, and earth will utter the great celestial exhale because then we can all stop moving.” [2]

But in this story in Luke, and for us now as well, we are not there yet. “Jerusalem comes at the end of the story, which means we are always more clear about what Jesus is asking us to give up than we are about where he is taking us!” [2]

Let me offer a couple of contemporary examples that may help us better understand not only the larger meaning of the Jerusalem that Jesus had set his face to, but also the metaphorical Jerusalem as the place where the kingdom and justice and peace prevail. I think that both of these individuals absolutely exemplify the single-minded focus and commitment to what they understand the kingdom is supposed to be.

Partly because of the Supreme Court decision this week altering some of the provisions of the Voting Rights Act he helped give birth to, Martin Luther King is the first example I have in mind. I believe that in turning his face to Washington and to the “dream” he would famously articulate there in his signature speech, Dr. King represented the same kind of commitment to his Jerusalem as Jesus did to his. And I think Dr. King also understood fully that he was also facing similar dangers to those Jesus faced.

For other obvious reasons, I’ve also been thinking a lot this week about the life and work of Nelson Mandela. We typically don’t identify Mandela as a religious leader, but I think that his “kingdom” vision for the people of South Africa, a vision he nurtured and fostered throughout his 27 years in prison at Robben Island, is another similar form of turning his face to his own Jerusalem.

I haven’t read enough to know whether Mandela had any reason to believe that his commitment to that dream or his own endurance behind bars would eventually achieve it. But I feel fairly certain that whatever dimensions of a New Jerusalem can be seen today in South Africa (even in the midst of tremendous problems and uncertainty) would not have come to pass without Mandela’s turning his face to it.

But what about the other piece of this, the proclamation that “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” What’s illustrated here, of course, is that “In contrast with “Jesus’ decision ‘to will one thing’...” we see these three would-be disciples who suffer from a clash of loyalties. “They simply weren’t ready for the road that Jesus was walking. Jesus made it clear that for one to be a disciple of his there must be self-denying devotion, the willingness to prioritize absolutely, and the giving of exclusive attention.” [1]

I think this is precisely the point, and not a very comfortable one! While I don’t think that Jesus was necessarily condemning any of these three, he was certainly calling attention to the fact that each was not yet prepared to commit as wholeheartedly as needed to the journey ahead. There’s nothing to suggest that the reasons they gave were anything other than what would have been customary and even urgent at the time. Even for the man who asked to go bury his father, we have to consider that perhaps his father had just died, and by Jewish custom, needed to be buried before another sundown. To that particular would-be disciple, this was obviously an urgent situation. [3]

But as Barbara Crafton describes, this particularly urgency is greatly exaggerated in comparison with the urgency of Jesus’ mission and ministry and his journey to Jerusalem. “Already Jesus himself is marching towards his own death.” And thus, “Everything else is secondary.” [3]

So it’s really all about priorities and distractions. In the case of each of the three people appearing in this dialog with Jesus, they haven’t really understood how the priorities they think they have conflict with the need to prioritize joining Jesus in his journey. In fact, they are distracted from seeing that greater vision by the details of their lives – maybe in the same way we are distracted from much greater moments in our lives by our little electronic friends, or the countless ways we fill our days and evenings and weekends and, yes, Sundays, with a thousand other things that must be done in pursuit of other kingdoms.

Well, where does the plow fit into all of this? Plowing is actually a very important metaphor in this context. In a sermon more than a century ago, Albert Schweitzer exhorted his listeners to become good plowmen, by which he emphasized that a good plowman always keeps his eyes fixed on the object ahead, in this case the shining figure, the Light of the World, who stands at the end of the row to show us where to plow. [4]

Remember, too, that plowing has always been an act of moving forward, and never backward. No plow has yet been crafted to operate in reverse. And if you are plowing forward, but keep your eyes on what is behind you, you very likely will drift from your purpose, and perhaps even help to create further chaos in the field!

But how, then – in Heaven’s name – can we hope to achieve the same kind of attention to this moment and to our own quest for the kingdom? And how can we adjust our priorities away from our myriad of distractions in order to follow where we know we are truly called? Well, I have no big answer for this. But then again, there is something.

One obvious thing we could always do is throw up our hands in hopeless desperation. [Demonstrate]. But we can also lift them up to express our need for and our readiness to receive the grace that is offered, no matter how inattentive and distracted we may be, and how far short we fall of the call to discipleship.

Or finally, perhaps, as Richard Rohr suggests, in the end, "All we can do is try to keep our hands cupped and open and ask God to teach us how to keep our hands cupped and open." [5]

Amen.

1. Dwight W. Cumbee, "Pastoral Implications I – Luke 9:51-62," in www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file-2210.
2. M. Craig Barnes, "Don't Look Back – Luke 9:57-56," 2007, in www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=3059.
3. The Rev. Barbara Crafton, "Let The Dead Bury Their Dead," June 29, 2007.
4. Albert Schweitzer, "Reverence for Life," translated by Reginald H. Fuller (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), p. 43.
5. Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999), p. 47.

David Baylor
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Seattle
www.ststephens-seattle.org