

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, June 26, 2016

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces.

He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where

is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over.

Luke 9:51-62

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

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." But 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." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Let us pray... This morning's gospel lesson from Luke recalls the time when the risen Jesus was heading back to Jerusalem. Jesus was heading back to Jerusalem because it was almost time for him to be taken up to Heaven.

Along the way, Jesus and his disciples passed through a Samaritan village. Now, history tells us that the Samaritans and the Israelites were enemies: they hated each other. That's part of the meaning behind the parable of the Good Samaritan. That's also part of the meaning behind today's lesson.

And so, upon entering the village and seeing that the Samaritans weren't interested in providing hospitality to Jesus, James and John asked Jesus if he wanted them to command fire to come down from heaven and burn down the village.

But Jesus, infinitely wise and just days away from being reunited with his maker gives the disciples and us, the most powerful answer to the question 'What are we to do with those who do not believe in Jesus?'

He moved on. He didn't wipe out the village with fire, he didn't damn them to hell, he didn't dwell on their faults, he didn't blame them for the world's ills, he didn't point a finger at them and call them names.

No. Jesus lead the disciples and us by example: he simply moved on.

Now, if the first part of this reading is about those who will not follow Jesus, then the second part is about those who *want* to follow Jesus.

And here's where it gets really interesting!

The first person on the road who comes to Jesus and says 'I will follow you wherever you go' is told that to do so means to no longer have a permanent home. Jesus uses the metaphor of the foxes and the birds, and how they have their homes, but that Jesus, and by extension, his followers, do not. The Good News is meant to be spread around, not kept in one place.

To another person on the road, Jesus said 'Follow Me'. But that person wanted to take care of his father's funeral arrangements before leaving everything. But to that person, Jesus says 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.' Everyone who wants to follow Jesus wants to do so on their own terms, in ways that fit into their own lives. But here, Jesus is reminding the disciples, and us, that human customs and traditions, even those surrounding the death of a loved one, are less important than proclaiming the Kingdom of God.

Another person on the road said that they would like to follow Jesus, and all they needed to do was to go back home in order to say goodbye to their family.

And Jesus, though a carpenter by trade, uses a farming metaphor for this person. He says 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God'

Now, what could he have meant by that?

In the last church that I served, there was a farmer who was a trustee of the church. He ran a modest family farm that sold its produce at a stand on the side of the road.

His wife had emphysema, his oldest daughter was grown and had moved away, his oldest son worked for Kodak, and his youngest son had developed a seizure disorder as a result of a severe diabetic coma.

This man had a lot on his plate. He needed to plant 200 pepper plants, but there was no one left in his immediate family to help him do it. Some members of the church offered to help, me included.

And so, one morning in mid-May, Harold gathered us, his ragtag volunteer farmer's brigade at the edge of his field, along with his tractor, a planting sled, and 200 pepper plants.

Before we started, he laid out his plan: he needed one person to drive the tractor, he would ride the planting sled, placing one plant down in the furrow every 24 inches, and then he needed one person to tamp down the earth around the newly planted peppers.

But no one there had ever driven his kind of tractor before. But this one gentleman, Jack, who was also a trustee of the church, volunteered to give it a try. I said I would tamp down the earth around the newly planted peppers, and the others could walk beside the sled and give him full flats of plants as he needed them.

Jack got on the tractor, and Harold's only advice was, 'Don't look back at me, or at the line of peppers, just look ahead at the stakes at the end of the rows.'

So Jack started off, very slowly, and the sled opened up a furrow, and Harold dropped a plant in, and the sled closed the furrow and I tamped the earth around the newly planted pepper, and it looked like things were going to work out just fine.

About halfway in to the first row, Jack decided to look back to see how the line of peppers looked. And the tractor veered to the left! Jack corrected his steering a little too far, and the sled veered to the right!

After a minute, he got back on line, and we completed the first row of peppers. And in the middle of the field, between two straight lines of newly planted peppers, was a beautifully curved 'S' of pepper plants!

When we were all done, and we were standing around admiring our work, Harold, a man of few words, and a man carrying a lot of worries around his wife's health, his son's health, and the health of his farm, looked at Jack and said, 'Well, at least you get more plants in a curvy row.'

Looking back when you are plowing means you lose sight of your destination, and you risk ruining your rows.

Jesus was making just this very point. If we choose to follow Jesus, we must be looking forward, like one whose job it is to run the plow. To look back is to risk losing our line.

So in these two short paragraphs from the gospel according to Luke, we have the deep and abiding wisdom of our savior, Jesus.

For those of us who wish to follow Jesus, we have been given some deep wisdom from our savior: we must do no harm to those who do not make room for Jesus. We must be prepared to take the Good News out into the world instead of keeping it in our familiar surroundings. We must let human customs and traditions have their place, but understand that they fall short of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. We must not look back when we choose to follow Jesus, but rather, look ahead to the goal of the Kingdom of God.

Choosing to follow Jesus means we're going to stand out from the rest of the world. We're going to act differently from others. We're going to care about different things than the world cares about, and that's going to make us look very different.

Choosing to follow Jesus means we're *not* going to judge or punish those who choose a different path. Jesus would want us to simply move on and share the good news elsewhere.

Choosing to follow Jesus means we're going to take on some sacrifices in order to make our faith a priority.

For proclaiming the Kingdom of God and following Jesus demands nothing less than our very best.

The bar is set very high for those who wish to be disciples of Christ. And what we're likely to find is that most of us will fail many times

before we get it right. It might take a lifetime of attempts before some of us get it right. And we might not know until our lives are over.

But we have to try. We have to try and look forward to the Kingdom, not back to the past, or to the world's empty diversions. Even if we fail, we have to try.

And *if* we fail, if in a moment's hesitation we quickly look back, just to check, well at least we'll have more peppers in the row. Amen.