

Luke 9:51-62 6.26.25 Bill Uetracht Pentecost 3

I have to say that Jesus' words in today's gospel reading bug me. They especially bug my little pastoral heart. I preside at a plethora of funerals and memorial services. These are services I advocate for. I can't stand it when people say things like, "Oh, don't have a service for me. I don't want you to go to all that trouble. I don't really like being the center of attention." Ba humbug! Get over yourself. It's not really all about you.

And while I am on this rant, I don't like it when people can't seem to make time for funerals and memorial services. "I am not sure we can fit it in. We've got soccer games, hockey tournaments, work responsibilities. I think we are going up to the cottage on that weekend." For heaven's sakes. People don't die just every day, unless you are in my line of work. If you ought to be able to give up time for something, it ought to be death. Death is an intrusion into life. Your little schedule ought to be intruded into, presumed upon.

So, I suspect you understand why I find Jesus' words today troublesome. A man who wants to follow Jesus says to him: "Jesus, just give me a little time. I need first to bury my father." What could be a more sacred duty than that? I mean he's not asking for a little more time so that he could get a pedicure. He's asking to take care of his dead dad. His dad, not his fifth cousin six times removed.

But then, Jesus says, "Let the dead bury the dead." I mean, come on, Jesus! And then Jesus tells someone who wants to follow him but needs a little time to inform his family where he is going to be, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

My wife gets perturbed with me, if I don't tell her what I am doing with a couple hours in the evening. How do you think she is going to react, if I don't show up at all?

Jesus, you wouldn't make a good husband. And I don't think you would make a good pastor. We pastors care about humans and their feelings, their grief, and the rituals that help them deal with their grief. You aren't appearing to be overly pastoral these days.

So what is going on? Is Jesus just hard-hearted? Well, the first part of the text tells us that that is not the case. With his face set toward Jerusalem, the place where he is going to die, he responds to some messengers who have been sent ahead of him and are reporting back to him regarding their experience in Samaria. Their experience hasn't been overly positive. The Samaritans, the enemies of the Judeans, aren't receiving them. So, Jesus' disciples, James and John, ask him if he wants them to be like Elijah and command fire to come down upon the Samaritans. You want us to blast them, the disciples are asking?

But Jesus isn't into violence, even if it seems that far too many of his followers are. He rebukes his followers. He casts out the demons. Violence is the demon. He isn't going to bring destruction onto the Samaritans. Later, by the way, they are going to be the heroes. So clearly, Jesus isn't hard-hearted. I don't think that he is against funerals or taking care of your responsibilities.

But Jesus lives in light of a new urgency, a reality that shapes who he is and what he is about. That reality the first three gospels, including Luke, call the "kingdom of God," the reign of God. And this reality is not the place where you go when you die. It's God's way of doing things, what life looks like if God is in charge, if God is the king of the here and now. Jesus is preoccupied with this reality, which causes him sometimes to be out of touch with business as usual, out of sync with how the kingdoms of this world operate. Now Jesus isn't naïve. He's in touch with the real world out there. In fact, he is

so in touch with it that he has his face set toward it. He's resolved to go to Jerusalem. He's on a mission. He's going into the real world.

But while he's going there, he's focused on the world of God. And the world of God is for him, and frankly for those who follow him, a matter of great urgency. It's a matter that pushes us forward into the future. It is not something focused on the past. He and the movement are going somewhere, somewhere new, somewhere that cannot be restricted by the past.

Frankly, many of us are restricted by the past. Many of us are controlled by where we've been, by the family we've been a part of, by the responsibilities that once were ours. We have a hard time going forward because we are burdened by the bygone, by the former, by the long-ago. The past can cripple us. And the past sometimes is represented by people. John Petty says that each human face, each person, "is a contemporary embodiment of the past." The family, he says, "is tradition par excellence."

And it's not that Jesus is opposed to tradition. Actually, Luke portrays Jesus as a very traditional person, as one who went regularly to the synagogue as a matter of custom. Jesus was in some ways a traditional guy. But he seems to recognize how tradition sometimes can prevent us from moving forward. I've seen that with families who welcome a new person into the family through marriage. Well, this family has done holidays in a certain way forever. And now they have a new person who has his or her own family and traditions. But, the family insists, the future has to look like the past. We've got to do it the way we have always done it. And the consequence is hard feelings, fractured relationships, crabbiness, resentment, and anger.

In God's kingdom, Jesus is saying, we are shaped by our future. We are not defined by our past. And again, nothing represents the

past more than the family, which is why Jesus says, “Let the dead bury the dead” and “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” The people who are joining his community need to get ready to move forward. They cannot be constrained by that which keeps them locked in the past. And honestly, often nothing can do that more than family—what our family did to us; what our family’s expectations are; what our family says that we must be about; how the family defines the schedule.

Family is a great gift. But it is not everything. And it can keep us from the very best in life. My sister, who now is dead, for too many years was mad at me because I left the family and created a new one in church communities in Toledo and Muskegon. She had a hard time understanding why I couldn’t be at everything back home and why my priorities had changed. Did I not care about the family anymore? Did they not matter? Eventually, she got over that. But our relationship was not all that it could have been because the past was running the show, because it was hard to let go of what had been to discover what was yet to be.

To follow Jesus is to be going to someplace new. Now, where is he going? Again, he is heading to Jerusalem, to the place where the cross will loom large. It’s strange. But what God is up to in the world looks like a cross. And the cross brings a sense of urgency. Heck, if he is heading to Tahiti for a vacation on the beach, the call wouldn’t be so urgent. But when death is on its way, life looks very different.

I have to say, as one who accompanies people in the last part of their lives, I get to experience that for the dying life looks really different. When you are dying, there’s much that doesn’t really matter. There’s a new kind of urgency. And the urgency doesn’t have to do with stuff, achievement, accomplishment, opinions, things of

the past. Very often, when you are dying, the urgency has to do with love that the now requires.

Jesus is heading to the cross, to the place where sacrificial love, self-giving love is going to be writ large. That love is looking for love. That love is inviting us to follow it, as our theme suggests, with abandon. Love is urgent. It wants you and the whole of your life. Love has a future prepared for you. It can't let you stay tied to the past, tied to what happened to you, tied to the limits your family imposed on you. Love is compelling you to go forward.

No doubt. It's not easy following Jesus. No doubt he can bug you with what he has to say. But that is how love works. It bugs us. It unsettles us. It takes us to a new land. It leads us even to the cross. But this I know, because I've heard the story a time or two. The cross is not the end of the story. The cross gives way to resurrection. The path of discipleship is not easy, but oh the new life it brings!

Should you take care of your dead father? Yes, of course. Should you tell your relatives when you are leaving the house and starting a new endeavor? For heaven's sakes, yes. But should you remain stuck in the past, tied to only what your family provides and expects? Heck no! Love is waiting to take you forward. . . into love.