

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, Louisiana
26 June 2016

Luke 9:51-62

This particular Gospel passage is so confusing that I decided to do a Bible Study this morning. The Gospel of Luke can be divided into two major sections, Chapter 1:1 to Chapter 9:50 and Chapter 9:51 to the end of the book. We can call the first section, “Ministry in Galilee” and the second section, “Journey to Jerusalem.” Our episode today, therefore, is the beginning of the second section. For the next 19 weeks we will read the stories of this section. They are a combination of original stories in Luke and stories that only appear in Luke and Matthew (What commentators call, “Source Q”). We know that Luke has followed closely the framework of the Gospel of Mark during the first section. He now leaves Mark’s outline and goes in his own direction.

This section is very much an “on-the-go” section. We can see this by the frequent repetition of expressions such as “as he was going”, “as he journeyed to”, “On his way to...” Jesus is on the move to Jerusalem, the place of his ultimate sacrifice and vindication. As he sets off, he sends several disciples ahead of him to prepare the way. This is very normal for itinerary preachers. You can only travel on foot about 5 or 6 miles a day, and you must have a network of supporters willing to house you, feed you, and support you in other ways. Without this support you will not get very far. We hear that this particular village refused to accept him. This is not unusual. We know of the friction that existed between the Samaritans and the Jews. It was precisely these conflicts that cost Herod Antipas his reign in the year 44 CE. Apparently, conflicts between Jews and Samaritans led to great bloodshed and the Roman authorities saw Herod’s inability to stop the violence as proof that they needed to move from Vassal Kings to Roman Procurators to govern Judea.

We see echoes of the Prophet Elijah in this reading for today. It is as if Luke is telling us that Jesus fulfills the Elijah prototype, but Jesus is far superior to Elijah. Let me show you what I am talking about. The gospel starts, “as Jesus was about to be taken up...” This expression “Taken up” of course is an allusion to Elijah who was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire. This expression is also used for Jesus’ ascension. Jesus sends messengers to prepare the way, which reminds us of John the Baptist who was said to walk “in the spirit of Elijah”. When the Samaritan village refuses to welcome Jesus, James and John ask Jesus,

“Should we call fire from heaven to consume them?” Which of course is an allusion to Elijah, who calls fire from heaven several times against an enemy military officer and against the prophets of Baal. Jesus responds by rebuking them. He will not be the military Messiah they are expecting. He will not use violence to solve his problems. He is not the new “Judas Maccabeus” who will lead the country into revolution against the Romans, as Judas led the country into revolution against the Seleucids in the year 160 BCE. He is a different kind of Messiah. He is superior to Elijah and Judas because he will not resort to violence to accomplish God’s will for his life.

Having been denied hospitality by the Samaritans Jesus continues on his way to the next village. We don’t know how far the next village is, but we can safely assume that the group is tired, hungry and weary. We hear that someone approaches Jesus and tells him, “I will follow wherever you may go” to which Jesus says, “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head”. Jesus’ response in this interaction, which also appears in Matthew, is of course true in the moment. Jesus in fact has no place to lay his head, having been denied hospitality. He has no money for an inn, he has no network of supporters where he is, and he does not have the patronage of a wealthy person or someone in authority. He has nothing to offer this person right now. Of course, his response works on a different level as well. He who decides to follow Jesus must be ready to suffer deprivation and hardships for the sake of the Gospel. There is no prosperity promise here. Accepting Jesus sometimes will place the disciple in a collision course with the world, and we will be rejected, misunderstood, and unwelcome.

A bit further down the road Luke tells us of another interaction we also find in Matthew. Jesus himself tells someone, “Follow me”, to which the person responds, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus’ response to “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” is a bit confusing. Isn’t Jesus a good Jew? Doesn’t he know that Torah demands the proper honor of father and mother, and that this honor demands a proper burial? Hasn’t he read the popular book of Tobit, which equates the proper burial of the dead with acts of charity required of every Torah-obeying Jew? Of course Jesus is a good Jew. This expression must be understood figuratively to mean the willingness to break away with our history, our past, and our ancestors in order to follow Jesus. Many of us are so attached to the place of our birth, our ancestral home, and this beautiful town that we fail to realize that to follow Jesus we might need to leave everything that is comfortable to us and venture into new territories. Jesus may call some of us away from the very place that gives us an identity and a sense of belonging.

We once again see echoes of Elijah in the third interaction, which is only found in Luke. Jesus was on his way to the next village when another person says to Jesus, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." To which Jesus responded, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." You may recall that when Elijah called on Elisha to follow him the young man asked that he might go back and say farewell to his family, to which Elijah responds, "Of course. Who do you think I am that I would not allow this? (My paraphrase)." Yet, Jesus does not allow the young man to go. Luke is in fact telling us, "Following Jesus is harder than following Elijah because Jesus is far superior to Elijah." But, once again, the response means much more when we look at it in more detail. Many of us believe that our best times are behind us. Like churches who still mourn the faithful pastor who left them in 1984 and believe those were the best times in their life. Following Jesus requires us to be forward looking. Not to be stuck in the past, perpetually longing for the "good old days". Gospel work is future-looking work. We need to focus on what God might do through us wherever God chooses to send us and not dwell on our past failures or victories.

So, what does all of this mean to us right now? We must look deeper at what Jesus is telling us today. Being a follower of the Christ requires commitment, faith, and discipline. Christians are as Christians do. We can not call ourselves disciples without living by a Christian Ethic. Paul today tells us that a disciple of Christ must be willing to avoid, "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these." A Christian must be willing to have a total orientation to Christ in body, mind and soul. He or she must live in such a way as producing the fruits of the Spirit, which are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

This is what being a Christian is all about. Now, lest anyone think I am calling for a works-righteousness ethic, let me remind you that our works are not what we do to "earn" salvation, but rather, what we do as a loving response to God for the free gift of salvation through this Son, Jesus Christ. We cannot call ourselves a Christian without loving God above all things and our neighbor as ourselves. Our works are what the Holy Spirit of God enables us to do to show this love for Christ and others.

May God continue to bless us as we respond to his call for our lives through the quality of our faith and the overall disposition of our hearts. May he help us to love him and others as much as he has loved us in his Son, Jesus Christ. In his holy name we pray, Amen!

This Bible Study relies heavily on the exegesis of this passage by Pastor Brian Stoffregen, which can be found at <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/>.