

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost Year C
1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21; Luke 9:51-62

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In the reading from First Kings, we find Elisha plowing a field with twelve oxen – that is serious plowing: rich, land-owning, huge-crop kind of plowing. Perhaps this is why Elisha was well-suited for prophet's work? He knew how to guide a team in the direction they needed to go. He knew how to keep the furrows deep and straight. He jumps at this opportunity to follow Elijah but needed to take care of a few things first. Elijah seems to taunt him for it, saying, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" Go back and do what you have to do – as if this great prophet had not just made Elisha his successor. Elisha goes back and slaughters his oxen, uses the yokes for firewood and serves up a feast in celebration of his new life to come. Elisha has literally burned all bridges – once a wealthy farmer, he now had nothing to go back to. There is no returning to his old life. He is free to focus on God.

In the reading from St. Luke, Jesus is throwing his proverbial mantel over the people and telling them to follow him. There is urgency because as Luke tells us, "he set his face toward Jerusalem" and Jesus was not going to look back at the life he might have had, the ministry he might have continued, anything that might draw his mind away from the road to Jerusalem, the way he must take that will lead him to his fulfill the Scriptures: to death on the cross and to the resurrection.

There is a saying, "That is a tough row to hoe."

- Can't take you attention off your work, from the direction you are heading.
- Demands a lot of you – all of your time and energy

If you are following Jesus, that means you are taking up His cross. It will take all of your strength. It will take all of your focus. It will take everything you have and all that you are. Earlier in this same Chapter of Luke's gospel, Jesus tells the twelve, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. (9:23-26) There is a heavy cost to discipleship.

In the passage for today Jesus said, "Follow me," and a man responded, "I will follow you wherever you go." That's s great response, but in following Jesus, there will be no place to be comfortable, for "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Jesus said to another, "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." There is no time – There is no time to even tend to the dead. Jesus is essentially telling this man that one of the most basic obligations in society of a son to his parents is not as important as following him. This is hard to hear in our time and would have been seen as harshly counter-cultural in Jesus' day.

Yet another man 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 plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." There is no time for farewells (If you are plowing and you look back/get distracted, your oxen are going to go off the furrow's line and the row will be ruined.) If you

want to follow Jesus at this point in St. Luke's Gospel, there is no time such as Elisha had to stop for the good-byes to family or to cook a barbeque feast for friends if they are to follow him. When you turn toward Jerusalem alongside Jesus – there is already nothing worth return to. If you are really going to follow Jesus, to join him on his journey to Jerusalem, Luke wants you to know and understand that you are either all “in” or you are all “out.”

This is a hard thing to hear, especially in our world and culture where everyone is used to leaving their options open. There is a maddening trend that has been going on for a number of years now, and perhaps you have encountered this: people do not RSVP anymore. I can't tell you the number of times I have read letters to Miss Manners in the newspaper on this topic. Invitations go out, the requested date for a response comes and goes, with few responses are made. People will RSVP, “yes” and then do not show up, without any excuses. There is a trend of people who hold out for “a better offer” for a given day and then they do show up at your party after all, without having made a response. I think in many ways we can apply this phenomenon to faith. I think St. Luke might nod his head in agreement and say something like, “just so.” Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem – his ministry has taken on an extreme focus. We get a sense of this in that the Gospel passage as it begins,

“When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem... 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 toward Jerusalem.” The village of Samaritans was probably hoping and expecting to welcome the Jesus who had been teaching and preaching in Galilee. They wanted healing and miracles, not talk about prophecies and scripture being fulfilled. But they encountered the Jesus who had set his face toward Jerusalem, who was laser-focused on what God had willed for him to do. Prophecy and Scripture fulfilled means you are being called to change your ways, take on a new action, and see things as God sees them. That must have been a bitter pill – too bitter a pill for that village. Were they a particularly weak or bad people? Is “setting our faces toward Jerusalem” and following Christ something that is just very hard to do?

Are you ready to RSVP to Jesus' call, “follow me?” What is the better offer we are waiting for? Do we have other things we feel we need to do, life details we need to pay attention to before we put our hand to the plow? I think we all do this mental gymnastics of setting our faith aside for a time as we turn our attention elsewhere. It isn't necessarily bad things that grab our attention, just things that clutter our lives. We get distracted from our faith by what are sometimes essential and important activities like the people in the Gospel story. At least they feel like they are essential and important to us. These stories such as Elisha's call and this encounter from St. Luke's Gospel ask us to pay attention to our faith: to take a look at the things in our lives that are standing in the way of us diving into the deep end of God's call to us. Are you willing to burn all the bridges to your past life? Are you willing to get uncomfortable? Are you willing to be counter-culture and proclaim God's Word to a world that may not want to hear it? Are you ready to put your hand to the plow and never look back? Keep your eyes focused on Jesus and your face set toward Jerusalem – let nothing separate you from the love of God and the joy of promises and prophecies fulfilled in Jerusalem.

Amen.