

Luke 9:51-62; 1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21; Galatians 5:1,13-25

When we hear these words of Jesus it is hard to understand why he would not want people to follow him, and allow those he wants to follow him attend to their family duties. It takes a lot of investigating and discernment to understand what is going on in this passage.

Ask Bill, there are times when I have my mind set on something and I am so focused that I either don't hear what he is saying, or ignore him, or don't accept his help if I don't think I need it. Am I the only person who has this attitude?

Jesus has his face set toward Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the city of David, the home of the Jewish temple. He sends his representative into Samaritan territory to seek food and housing, but they refuse him. We know Jesus has been in Samaritan territory before, why would they refuse him this time? Because he is heading toward Jerusalem. The Samaritan and Jewish people are enemies. It is said that this feud goes far back in history, at the time of Nehemiah when the Jewish temple was being rebuilt. The Jewish people had been exiled into Babylonian captivity, but not all the Jews were taken, some were left behind. When Persia conquered Babylonia the Persian King Cyrus agreed to allow Nehemiah to return to rebuild the temple. When the people who had not been taken into captivity volunteered to help their help was refused because they had intermarried with non-Jewish people of the land, they were no longer considered "clean". Of course the left behind people were angered, and became bitter enemies of the Jewish people who returned from exile. This enmity continued throughout history, so it is no wonder that Jesus was refused hospitality when he was approaching Samaritan territory on his way to Jerusalem. And I can't even believe that the disciples James and John would ask Jesus if he wanted them to strike fire upon the town. They definitely hadn't learned to turn the other cheek; a lesson we find hard to follow.

As they were journeying on their way another man told Jesus he would follow wherever Jesus took him to which Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." What does he mean by that?

It is late in Jesus' time on earth, wouldn't you think he would want all the people on his side he could find? Yes, he wanted all the loyal people, people who wouldn't be put off by his determination to do what had to be done. Foxes have holes for home on this earth. Birds have nests for homes on this earth. Jesus doesn't have a home on this earth. His home is in the heavenly realms with his Father. He isn't long on this earth, and soon the man who asked to go with him would be put into a difficult situation. Jesus understood the man didn't have the character to stick with him without having had the opportunity to spend the amount of time his other followers had spent with him.

Jesus must have recognized some deeper understanding in the last two men whom he would have allowed to follow him, had they not had more earthly ties. Is it wrong to want to bury your deceased relative? No, of course not. But Jesus was on a schedule, he didn't have the time to wait for this man to do something that was an earthly benefit when Jesus was headed toward a heavenly realm. The same with the one who wanted to say goodbye to his family. There is nothing wrong with letting your family know where you're headed, it's even a wise, safe thing to do. However, Jesus didn't have time for the earthly matters. He had his face set toward Jerusalem, and he was on his way to carry out his full mission.

In the first reading this morning from the Old Testament we meet up with Elijah who has come out of hiding in the cave after being rejected by Jezebel. Remember how Elijah had dueled with the prophets on Mt. Carmel? God won by sending fire down to destroy not only the wood on the altar, but the altar itself. Then Elijah raced down the mountain to face Queen Jezebel because he believed she would be defeated. Finding that she wasn't, and that she put out an order for his death, Elijah ran away. He hid in the cave where he waited for God to speak with him in the still, small voice. Elijah, in today's reading, is now carrying out what God had instructed him to do, he is anointing Elisha to take over as prophet. He allows Elisha to say good-bye. And they cook a meal. The meal consists of the oxen Elisha was using to plow the fields, and he is using the yoke as firewood. In my mind the slaughtering of the oxen and the burning of the yoke is a symbol of breaking Elisha's ties to his old life and beginning a new life as a prophet. Elijah isn't aware of how important his role has been. He isn't aware that he will be taken up by a chariot in the sky, a wheel spinning within a wheel. We see him and Moses again when Jesus is transfigured on the mountaintop.

We don't know what Jesus, Moses and Elijah are discussing at that time of transfiguration, but it is possible that Jesus is learning that the time for him to head to Jerusalem is coming near. No matter when he learned of it, he is on a mission. A mission that results in his death, a death on the cross. But that was the plan from the beginning. When God created Adam and Eve in the garden, he knew there was the possibility that giving them free will would create a separation between God and humanity. God tried to re-establish a connection time and again, covenant after covenant, but humans are too, well, human. In the reading from Galatians this morning we heard how, as humans, we live by the flesh. And what comes out of those fleshly desires is nothing more than sin.

But when we accept what Jesus has done for us by taking the sin of the world upon himself, when we allow God to rule in our lives, when we follow the Spirit, we produce the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There will be times we slip up. But there is forgiveness to those who repent.

And that is the good news in today's difficult passage. Jesus had his face set toward Jerusalem. He was on the journey to save the world. He was the only one who could successfully complete this journey and he didn't want anything to hold him back from his mission of salvation for the world.

All glory be to God.