

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20
Galatians 5:1,13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Hardly a day goes by when we are not bombarded with information about how to get fit...physically fit. And we are encouraged to do all we can to promote our longevity. The idea is to remain physically healthy for as long as we can and to live as long as possible. We are told what foods we should eat; which exercises are the best; how to lose weight and how to lower cholesterol. We are encouraged to squeeze every bit of life we can out of this life. We get more information about how to take care of our bodies than we could possibly ever use...or implement. But our bodies aren't 'us.' Our bodies are simply where we live while we are in this world.

We are rarely bombarded with information about how to get our souls...our real selves...fit. While being physically fit is hard, becoming spiritually fit is almost impossible. There are very few measures to let us know how we're doing. We can't put our souls on the scale. We can't take the blood pressure of our emotions or listen to the beat of love in our hearts. We have no way to measure how we're doing or even how to gauge the value of what we are doing. If I do this, will my soul expand? If I don't do that, will I be spiritually healthier? Sometimes, it's almost impossible to tell. Although, we've all met people that seem so serene and so loving that we just instinctively know that their souls must be in pretty good shape. That's what Jesus wants for us. When Jesus enters our lives, that's exactly what he asks us to do...to become spiritually healthy.

Twice in our scripture readings this morning we are told about what makes someone unfit for the kingdom of God. Does that mean that people who are 'unfit for the kingdom of God' simply aren't going to get in? Are they going to be turned away at the pearly gates...excluded for non-performance? Perhaps our scripture readings this morning are not quite that literal. What does it mean to be 'fit for the kingdom of God?' Do we have to meet some unspecified status in virtue in order to be fit? If so, how is such a thing measured? How good do we need to be in order to be fit for the kingdom of God?

Maybe it's not something that's measurable. We know that Jesus taught his disciples...and us...about how to respond to the world, how to behave, and how to live our lives. Most of us find it pretty hard to do as Jesus has taught us. For example, most of us find it pretty hard to turn the other cheek. We find it nearly impossible to love those who hate us and wish to do us

harm. And we struggle mightily to forgive someone who has hurt us. Common sense tells us not to divest ourselves of all our wealth and give it to the poor and follow Jesus, so we don't do that. Does our reluctance to part with financial security and personal possessions make us unfit for the kingdom of God. Does that mean that we aren't going to get in?

There is a sense of urgency in both Paul's letter to the Galatians that we've just heard and in Jesus' instructions to his disciples as they make their way to Jerusalem. When they enter Samaria, they are rejected and insulted. James and John want to retaliate, but Jesus tells them to forget it and just move along to the next village. How hard is it for us to just gloss over insult and rejection move on? As Jesus listens to his followers' pledge to 'follow him' wherever he goes, Jesus paints a very clear picture. It's not an easy row to hoe. It's not an easy or comfortable life. Jesus tells them, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head." His is not an easy life. Following him will not be easy or comfortable. And Jesus tells it like it is...no sugar coating!

This sense of urgency in what Jesus says to his followers, "Do it now!", seems to be the rallying cry for the day. Don't wait until tomorrow. Do it now. Even the most benign request to say 'good-bye' to family or to bury a father is met with a resounding, "No. Come now!" It's not just the urgency that seems profound. It's also Jesus' message that they...and we...can't live in two worlds. They can't follow Jesus and hold on to the past. They can't follow Jesus and look back. The metaphor of putting one's hand to the plow is a reminder for those around Jesus who are familiar with plowing the land. If you are plowing a row and you turn your head to look back over your shoulder, you run the risk of ruining your present work. Don't look back. The message seems to be that you can't live in two worlds. You can't live in the world that Jesus is describing and living and still live in the world that you know now. This is a nearly impossible task.

And all of us have history. All of us have memories. All of us have people and places that are very dear to us in this life. To give all of that up for what seems to be the impossible dream of Jesus is more than we can bear. Jesus has taught us how to say a good farewell, and yet he's telling those who want to follow him to just drop everything and come with him. What a decision to make...for them and for us!

It's the urgency that Jesus wants to impress on them...and on us. It's the single-mindedness that Jesus wants to be sure they...and we...are ready for. To follow Jesus is to let go of all that we know. To follow him is to live in that world with him rather than in this world where so much is familiar and comfortable. To follow Jesus is to leave our comfort zone and go with him. It's anything but easy! Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God...the kingdom of heaven...and he is trying to tell them...and us...what we need to do to get fit to live there. Jesus shows his

followers what the kingdom of God is like. He lives it and he describes it for them. And if you listen closely, you can hear the description of the kingdom of God and the description of those who are fit for the kingdom of God described by both Jesus and by St. Paul.

Perhaps it's not a matter of people being banned from heaven or turned away at the gate because they are bad or sinful. Maybe that's not what this means. Maybe St. Paul's admonition about the people who are not fit for the kingdom of heaven doesn't mean that they won't be allowed in. Maybe what it means is that they aren't ready for it. They haven't developed the skills or the mental outlook or the emotional readiness to be able to live in the kingdom of God. They wouldn't know how to behave there. They just haven't gotten themselves fit in this life to know how to manage in the next. It's not that they are so bad that they will be barred. It's that they haven't learned the rules of the road...haven't practiced them...haven't honed those skills that make them fit for the kingdom of God. And none of us can judge from the outside whether someone else is ready or fit for God's kingdom or not.

We've probably all met people who have an extraordinary sense of peacefulness about them. They are the ones that we look at and call 'serene.' These are the people we often envy because they seem so at home with themselves inside their own skin. They rarely get upset. They are almost always accepting of whatever life brings them. They have an extraordinary faith and trust in God...beyond what any of us think we might be able to manage ourselves. And we tend to think they must have been born that way. Well, perhaps they were, or perhaps they practiced long and hard to move themselves in that direction. Perhaps they spent their whole lives working on being spiritually fit so that when the day came for them to present themselves at the gates of heaven, they would be ready and fit to enter in.

Eternal life begins now. Jesus told us that. The kingdom of God can be glimpsed even now in this life. We have moments that we can identify as those moments when we have seen the possibility of heaven and all that heaven holds for us. When Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Perhaps he's reminding them...and us...not to stumble by looking back when we start on the path of making ourselves fit for the kingdom of God. Don't look back! You'll get tripped up! You'll take your eyes off the prize. You'll ruin the work you are doing now.

If ever you wonder which spiritual muscles you need to be developing, just remember how St. Paul described it to the Galatians: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And I doubt that St. Paul would object if we added forgiveness to this list. We know from what Jesus has told us that the kingdom of God is one that is just and fair for everyone. It is embraced by people who have the faith and

trust of a child. It is a place where there are no tears, no unhappiness, no broken hearts, no grief nor any kind of sorrow. This is what Jesus is asking us to prepare for. Begin now, he says, while you are still in this life, so when the time comes, you will be ready to enter into the kingdom of God. So right now, in this life, practice, practice, practice. Grow through prayer. Grow through action. Grow through scriptural study and allow the God who created you to transform you. This is where grace comes in...the grace of God granted to us through Jesus Christ without whose advocacy and help we would never be able to do any of the things that make us fit for the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells it like it is. Jesus always tells us the truth. And for that...and for the grace that Jesus provides, we can only say,

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.