

Luke 9: 57-62 “Leave the Dead to Bury Their Dead” Rev. Janet Chapman

Early on in my ministry, I remember a mentor of mine sharing during my evaluation that one of my growing edges was communication and procrastination, an unfortunate combination in the area of ministry because that is often the same struggle for most church boards. My instant response, before thinking about the irony, was, “Do you think we could talk about this later?” When I read this week’s lectionary scripture, which was actually last week’s, but I got to postpone it since I was gone, my first reaction was, “Sorry, Jesus, you’ve got it all wrong. Somehow you have lost perspective and somebody needs to set you straight.” You see, Jesus is at the point in his ministry where he is collecting a lot of potential recruits, his teachings are catching on and now he is headed towards Jerusalem, that place of ultimate confrontation, no turning back. At the turning point of C.S. Lewis’ beloved *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, several significant characters encourage one another with reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as powerful as they are succinct: “Aslan is on the move.” Well, Jesus is on the move here in the ninth chapter of Luke as he seems to have heard a sacred call to turn toward Jerusalem, and the rest of the gospel describes his steadfast journey there.

While Jesus’ face may be set to Jerusalem, he doesn’t take the most direct path. In fact, there is almost no discernible logic to the collection of stories and incidents that Luke relates, and there is no easy way to identify the route Jesus follows. This reality makes it easier for one like me to say, “Now hold up, Jesus, there are affairs which must be taken care of before I go galivanting all over tarnation just to serve you.” Sometimes we have to bury our dead – this is something we can’t procrastinate on and you are just going to have to wait. Sometimes we

have to say goodbye to those we are leaving or to those we have lost, and we will catch up to you eventually. Sometimes we have a few things that need to be taken care of before we launch into the unknown with you, before we jump onto that discipleship bandwagon. Then Jesus says, "Let that be; let's go!" His actual words translate, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the realm of God." But my protest still lingers, "So what you got going on, Jesus, is so important that I have to neglect the memory of my father to cater to your state of urgency?"

But what if that is the point exactly? I find myself stumbling on Jesus' words again, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Maybe there is more to this statement than I first picked up. Could it be true that sometimes we get so caught up in the midst of what has us so preoccupied that we lose sight of the things that are beyond our preoccupation? Maushan Simon clarifies. So many other times in scripture, we see nameless individuals petitioning Jesus for some miracle. Men and women begging Jesus to save their children, siblings asking Jesus to save their beloved, to hurry because time is of the essence. We have seen and heard how life was breathed back into their bodies, but that is not the case with this story. The man says, "let me bury my father," meaning the father is already gone, the man has made peace with his dad's death; there is no pleading with Jesus to change that outcome, only to give his father a proper burial. But in that moment, Jesus distinguishes between caring for those who are still living versus those who are already gone. Those who are preoccupied with death, those who are dying themselves, will stay with the dead unable to move on, unable to let go. I will never forget a man I once knew who spent years immobilized by the death of his wife. He was engulfed in the past, unable to move beyond her passing. He had stopped living and for 2

years, his friends and loved ones tried to bring him back to life but he would have none of it. Having known his wife, she would have been horrified by his behavior, she would have seen it as an affront to the good she sought to do while she was here on earth. But he couldn't see it; his world revolved around the darkness of his grief as he retreated into oblivion. He missed once-in-a-lifetime moments like family weddings, births, graduations, all with the idea that honoring such would be dishonoring her memory. He died three years to the day after his wife, however, everyone agreed he really died three years earlier. And Jesus says, "Leave the dead to bury their dead."

We don't know the circumstances of the man in our scripture but we do know Jesus' response and maybe it isn't as insensitive as we first thought. It seems to indicate that this man is caught between the past and the present while being shown his tomorrow. That tomorrow will not be easy, if he chooses to accept it. There will be hardships on the road; there will be tough decisions to make at the drop of a hat; no place will totally feel like home; and there will always be that urgency, that forthright boldness prodding from within to keep working on behalf of God's realm. Maybe, just maybe, what Jesus is saying to that man, whether he is young or old, is that what is before him is tomorrow, that yesterday has come and gone and that there is nothing more for him to do back there. Procrastination has no value because it keeps us stuck where we are, focused on our own little worlds and unable to move forward.

Many of us remember that catchy "Footprints" poem that's been around the block a few times now. The man dreams about walking along the beach, and for the longest time, he sees two sets of footprints, right? God is apparently walking with him. Then at a time when things are going wrong, he sees only one set of footprints, so he pulls God aside, saying,

“Where were you- where have you been? I’ve been all alone out there.” And God responds, “Hey, zip it. Those are my footprints, I was carrying you.” Well, there is a GenX version of the same poem that goes, “One night I had a wondrous dream, One set of footprints there was seen, the footprints of my precious Lord, But mine were not along the shore. But then some strange prints appeared. And I asked the Lord, ‘What have we here?’ Those prints are large and round and neat, ‘But Lord, they are too big and misshapen for feet.’ ‘My child,’ He said in somber tones, ‘For miles I carried you along. I challenged you to walk in faith, but you refused and made me wait.’ ‘You disobeyed, you would not grow, the walk of faith, you would not know. So I got tired, I got fed up, And there I dropped you on your butt.’ ‘Because in life, there comes a time, When one must fight, and one must climb, When one must rise and take a stand, Or leave their butt prints in the sand.’”

In our society today, a lot of butt prints get left in the sand because we choose to sit and stay put, we allow old practices and loyalties to hold us back. We make God wait because we just can’t get past ourselves. We are held back not just by our procrastination but our unconquered fear that offers no healing or transformative capacity. Having just walked at LA’s Huntington Beach with the dogs on vacation, I can tell you that walking in deep sand is hard work; my calves hate me! It would have been far easier to stay put on the boardwalk, unexposed and comfortable, I believe my small Shih Tzu would agree. But the bigger dog loved the water and sand surfing in his own style, while I collected a hoard of tiny shells all of which were not available up higher. I feel better for not holding back and don’t regret a minute despite those screaming calves. Perhaps Jesus recognizes our tendency to put off those things which are actually healing for us in the long run; perhaps God knows we come with ready

excuses to live as if we were dead rather than fully alive; maybe the Holy Spirit understands how easily we can defer our proclamations for a more equitable and just realm here on earth, how we can set aside our taking a stand on behalf of civil rights, how we can turn away from those young faces which stare back at us from oppressive environments ... just until we are in a better place, a better time when the stars align, so as to make our experience of the Gospel the perfect experience...as it was never meant to be. Jesus set his face towards Jerusalem and you and I are called to do the same as we choose to follow in his footsteps. There is no turning back, not for anything. For it is then that we find the commitment to leave the dead to bury their dead, while we move forward to live the abundant life God intended.