

June 26, 2022

Luke 9:51-62

A Journey of Grace

I learned early in life the joy of reading the great stories of journeys and quests—Narnia, The Knights of the Round Table, Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. And it dawns on me as an adult that our lives in Christ, from birth to death, from ignorance to wisdom, from exile to return, can be described as a journey, a quest. And no quest is easy. Every time we set out on a journey, we will face trials and tribulations. These may not come in the form of a dragon or an evil knight or river pirates, but we will have challenges and, by confronting these challenges, we will be transformed. We will not be the same people we were when we set out on the journey.

Our Gospel lesson for today is part of a journey, a quest. It is the story of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is a journey from the life He knew in Galilee to the death He will experience in Jerusalem. It is a story in which we see Jesus move from a prophet into the crucified Messiah, and Jesus' followers will be transformed from bystanders into disciples. On the journey to Jerusalem, we explore the mystery at the very heart of the Christian faith, the mystery of who we are called to be and what we are called to do.

The early Christians used to refer to themselves as "The Way." And it seems that by calling themselves "The Way," the early church was saying something really important about who they were. This was not a static and settled community. They did not refer to themselves as "The Immovable Fortress of Faith" or "The Mighty Temple of Absolute Truth." Rather, they referred to themselves as "The Way." And that is a name for a group of people who see themselves on the move, who find their true identity on the journey, who discover their deepest and truest lives as they follow Christ on His way of self-giving love. And this journey, like all journeys, will mean facing trials and tribulations. There will be risks and there will be conflict. But there is also a promise. The promise that on the journey we will be transformed. The promise that in losing our lives, our lives will be saved. The promise that on "The Way," we will find new and abundant life. Luke tells us, "When the day drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem," and some of his disciples followed him on "the way."

The first episode of this journey occurs in Samaria. It is a fascinating story that we might think of as a bit of First-Century, Middle-Eastern Road Rage. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria on their way to Jerusalem. Now, that Jesus chose a route through Samaria is itself an interesting detail, because Jews and Samaritans did not like each other. Like so many Middle Eastern neighbors, then and now, they had a centuries-long conflict going. In fact, the dislike between Jews and Samaritans was so bad that in Jesus' day, many Jews avoided traveling through Samaria altogether. They would take a long detour around the whole country. There was sort of an unofficial travel advisory saying it was unsafe for Jews to travel through Samaria. Then, as now, there are just some places in the world where it is not safe to go.

Let me summarize the events of our reading. His disciples ask if they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume unbelievers, and he sternly tells them, "No."

A village does not welcome him, and he simply moves on to another village.

A potential convert says he will follow him, "wherever you may go," and he replies, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests."

He invites a stranger to follow him, and that one replies, "First let me go and bury my father"—and then he says, "Let the dead bury their own dead."

And another asks simply to say farewell to his loved ones. To this one, Jesus says, "No one who puts a hand to plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven."

So: He refutes retaliation or violence as a response to inhospitality, and He avoids conflict by simply moving on from an uncomfortable situation.

But then He seems to say something like, "If you wish to follow me, you must drop everything and everyone in your life. Just give up everything and follow me."

And just where is he leading? To Jerusalem, as it says in this passage "to be taken up." To his betrayal, crucifixion, and death.

Can He really mean this? Can our Lord and Savior be ordering us to put down our livelihoods, to put aside our relationships, and to abandon our property in order to enter into pain, suffering, and the very jaws of death?

Well, it sort of depends on whether you see Jesus as someone to worship or someone to follow. Now, both of these have merit, both have their supporters, both are completely orthodox and Christian. But, for today, let's consider the possibility that Jesus is asking us to follow. For, were we to worship Him without following Him, we might expect him to save us from trials, to rescue us from danger, to keep us from harm.

That's what an omnipotent God should do, right? That's how the Almighty really ought to treat those He loves. And that's exactly the problem. For this is to make Jesus into a mere religion, instead of a journey joining God is His plan to redeem the world.

The theologian Richard Rohr has provided some insight. He says we have shifted from a religion of following to a religion of believing and belonging. Rohr tells us that this shift—from following Jesus to worshipping him—made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation. And that's where the significant difference lies. A religion of belonging and believing is concerned about who's in and who's out, about what specific doctrine people subscribe to, and about how they support the institution called the church. A religion of transformation, on the other hand, focuses on change. Changing ourselves into more and more of whom God is calling each of us to be, and changing the world around us into a more hospitable place for all of God's creatures.

What Richard Rohr is suggesting is much harder work. What Jesus calls us to do is much harder work. We can be like Elisha and ask for a double share of Elijah's spirit. We can wait around for the whirlwind to pull us into heaven. And we can hope for divine power to part the waters before us. Or we can settle down and do the work given to us: to share love, to spread joy, to wage peace, to foster patience, to nurture kindness, to exhibit generosity, to seek faithfulness, to cultivate gentleness, and to strive for better self-control.

This is what it is to follow Jesus, rather than just worship Him. To accept our baptismal calling to become dead to sin and alive to righteousness. To seek, by word and example, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly—following our God on the same path. This path that may lead us directly into whirlwinds or even through the valley of the shadow of death. But also the path that will lead us from sin and death to the kingdom of heaven and everlasting life. The path can and will leave a world behind us a little better, a little kinder, and little safer. The path can and will leave us

stronger, more spiritually fit, and better able to cope with whatever lies ahead.

As St. Paul puts it, we are “called to freedom” and this freedom comes by leaving things behind.

Maybe not every possession, maybe not every relationship, maybe not every thing and everyone—but certainly we are called to leave behind what Paul calls “the works of the flesh.”

To leave behind strife. To leave behind anger and quarrels. To leave behind dissensions and factions.

And to follow Jesus on the journey toward Love: love for God, love for people, love for enemies—Love for all the stuff God loves.

Jesus’ promise to all of us—that we will be inheritors of the kingdom of heaven: this does not promise us avoiding all difficulties in this life. The spiritual life is not one without pain, without suffering, without challenge. But if we truly follow Jesus, we have an amazing trailblazer ahead of us.

One who never repaid anyone evil for evil. One who sought only love—with others, and with God. One who set his face on Jerusalem, knowing that what lay ahead was torture and death.

And who one who renounced the devil and all his works, renounced the vain pomp and glory of this world, and turned away from all covetous desires of the same—and then on the third day conquered death. So that we might be gifted with heavenly virtues, everlastingly rewarded, and become the people of the way.

The way from sin and judgment. The way through pain and suffering. The way to unspeakable, unimaginable, ineffable joys prepared for us all.

This is what comes of following Jesus. Not a mere religion of belonging and believing, of who’s in and who’s out, of what’s correct and what is not. But a lifelong journey, following Jesus along his same path. A lifelong journey of transformation of ourselves and of the world around us. A lifelong journey toward greater union with God. Amen.