

Proper 8 - 5 Pentecost – Year C – June 30, 2010 - Homily
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62
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The daily themes for this year's Vacation Bible School were trust, love, follow, care and share. Every year the kids catch on to one or two of the VBS songs as their favorites for the week. This year, one of the best songs was from Wednesday's theme of following. The main verse is "I will study your teachings and follow your footsteps," repeated several times as the music gets faster and faster. The kids just loved it, and were busy signing each part and doing all the movements in no time at all. In many ways, our reading from Luke today is about following Jesus, but it also made me think of my teenage camping experiences.

As some of you already know, I really dislike camping and will avoid it at pretty much all costs these days. As a teenager, I did go camping a few times with my friends from school on weeklong camping and hiking trips. It all seemed like a grand adventure until the reality set in, usually after the first night or two with aching back and blistered feet. In all the years of moving that have followed, I've learned to travel much lighter than I ever did as a teen. Hauling around a sleeping bag, tent and a week's worth of food and clothing in a rucksack that probably weighed twenty pounds without anything in it was just no fun at all. Add to that the completely unpredictable weather in the north of England, where it is almost always windy with persistent drizzle, and morning mists that seep through every type of clothing known to humanity to create a special type of bone deep chill. Plus no fancy campsites with hot water or showers either. Just a bumpy cowpat littered field, usually at close to a forty-five degree slope with a couple of toilets and cold-water standpipes. However much camping conditions may have improved over the years, those early years have ruined it for me, and I've become immovable in my resistance!

When I read the story in Luke's gospel account, I wondered how I might have reacted to Jesus the Word made flesh who dwelt amongst us. Would the lure of His teaching and incredible miracles have been enough for me to follow Him from town to town like His disciples and the many women who provided for Him out of their own resources? Perhaps I too would have been the one that Jesus smiled at knowingly saying, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." There are some roads that I really don't want to travel or travel down again. What we learn from this text is that once Jesus began His ministry and was on the move towards Jerusalem He was basically homeless. For most of us, at least one of God's gifts and blessings is that we have never had to experience the frightening reality of homelessness – relying and trusting on the hospitality of others for shelter, food, and probably even clothing.

On reading this passage multiple times, I was struck by Jesus' single mindedness, His unwavering commitment to His own journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Yet at times, His responses seem so harsh and even legalistic. Overall, the point is not lost: discipleship requires a deep commitment, one that is only possible when God gives us the strength. Setting God and Christ above all else in our lives demands significant trust and faith, patience and perseverance. As bearers of the Gospel message, we will undoubtedly face rejection and suffering along our own journeys, as well as the rewards of God's love, joy and peace. In fact there are many priorities in our busy lives, and this passage seems to say, we must purposefully choose to place Christ first with focused single mindedness. The discipleship described is one of a life-changing shift in direction and priorities, frequently going against cultural norms and expectations. When it comes to competing priorities like whether we come to church on Sunday morning or go and play golf? Whether we decide to sleep in or go out for breakfast, etcetera, etcetera, Luke is telling us that nothing is more compelling or urgent in our lives than following the Lord. Yet we still have questions. Are we reading this right? Has anything been subsumed in this portrayal of what sounds like exclusivist dogma, bordering on legalism?

The first of Jesus' major characteristics that seems to be on vacation in this week's reading is compassion. Where is the compassion for the one who wants to follow Jesus, but wishes to say farewell to his

or her family first? Jesus will not wait, as the prophet Elijah waited on Elisha, but dismisses the potential follower as “unfit for the kingdom of God.” That doesn’t sound like the loving Jesus we have come to expect does it? The second missing element seems to be God’s grace. When the overarching theme of all the Gospels is God’s steadfast love and grace, God’s mercy and compassion, Jesus’ dismissive attitude and contrariness portrayed in this portion of Luke is hard to swallow. For the One who loved us so much that He was willing to die for us, we must wrestle a little more to make sense of the blunt rejection, and harsh words peppering this reading. Is this Jesus just reminding us of the painful rejection He will face, and that all His followers will have to deal with at some time or another? Is this Jesus challenging our instinctive desire for comfort, security, even the community of our family and friends? Or perhaps this is Jesus clarifying some important observations about humanity in that exaggerated, hyperbolic style that comes across as overkill. When we pause for thought and self-examination the reality is that we do tend to walk around with a lot of baggage packed in our rucksacks. We carry a load in the heavy weight of responsibilities and duties, self-importance, our own moral compasses, and whatever we are still hanging on to for security in this world. Is Jesus reminding us that only God can truly provide us with everything we need, and that our excess baggage is slowing us down? Or maybe Jesus is showing us that instead of trying to forge new paths for ourselves over hill and dale, we might do better to simply look to Him for the signpost that will lead us to the next stage of our journeys. Quite possibly that harsh tone we hear is our own conscience, otherwise known as the promptings of the Holy Spirit, that speaks the truth of our busy-ness. It is the truth we confess each week in our liturgy: we have not loved God with our whole hearts, or our neighbors as ourselves.

If we are oriented to God’s purpose in our lives, we see that a commitment to the way of the Lord sets all other priorities in perspective, and not the other way around. As the song goes, *I will study your teachings and follow your footsteps*. There is wisdom there as well. Our journey with God will go much better when we commit to preparing for the hike when we tone up our spiritual muscles and stamina through our study of the word. Part of growing in grace is understanding that God’s love is not pampering or pandering to our every whim, but about directing us to our greatest good. Ultimately, there is good advice for the journey here – study the Word of God, follow Jesus, and never let anything distract us from that priority in our lives. And when bad weather descends – as it always does – we will be immovable only in our love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and much better equipped to resist the vagaries of the world.

Amen.