



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 3 – Proper 8 (C)

Letting Go

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

Elijah told Elisha, “Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you.” Elisha said, “Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit.” Paul wrote, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” Amen.

Let go! Let go! Elijah is about to be taken up into the whirlwind, and his disciple Elisha is reluctant to let him go. Elijah says to Elisha, “Stay here!” but Elisha follows his teacher as far as he can, crying, “Father! Father!” until he can see him no longer. The Easter passage from John comes to mind. Mary stands weeping at the tomb. She doesn't recognize Jesus until he calls her name. Overcome with relief and joy, she calls out “Rabbouni,” which means “Teacher.” Jesus says to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” And in today's gospel passage, Jesus urges his followers to drop everything to follow him. Let go. Let go of your dying father, and those at home. Come now, directly to the path that leads to the kingdom of God.

In hospice settings, often the family of a dying patient will unknowingly hold on to their loved one. Their very presence at the bedside keeps the patient alive, not able to leave this life while their family holds them anchored to the world. It is not unusual for someone close to death to take their last breath, not with a family member holding their hand, but when the family member has gone to the bathroom or fallen asleep. “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.”

In today's gospel passage, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He is not distracted by the lack of welcome from the Samaritans. He tells his disciples to leave it, let it go. Jesus demonstrates unwavering determination, as he walks towards his fate in Jerusalem. He will not be held to this mortal life. He needs to ascend to the Father. Unity with God is the ultimate goal.

Today's reading addresses two important Pentecost themes: Discipleship, in service of the Church's mission to share the Gospel with the world, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which supports and encourages discipleship and mission.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul urges us to live by the spirit. And perhaps that is what Jesus is urging his followers to do when he says, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Paul contrasts living by the Spirit with desires of the flesh, or the world. Jesus emphasizes an urgent call to move forward into the life of discipleship, proclaiming the kingdom of God now, not later, after the tasks of the world have held us back. To be called is to turn with unwavering determination toward God.

Biblical scholars have spoken of the journey narrative embedded in the gospel of Luke. Clearly, in today's reading, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. He has followers traveling with him. In a double narrative, these disciples are not only on the journey to Jerusalem with their teacher but also on an interior journey of faith. This journey requires radical transformation, leaving behind all they have known and done, all they have held dear, to go in new directions, to a life utterly different than anything they could imagine. The disciples' journey will require the guidance of the Holy Spirit, especially after their beloved teacher leaves them. Elisha speaks the holiest, most poignant words a disciple can say when his teacher is going ahead to be one with God: “Grant me a double share of your spirit.”

True discipleship, unwavering commitment to a calling is hard when it involves letting go to a painful degree. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a book about this, entitled “The Cost of Discipleship.” For Bonhoeffer, Christianity is not an easy path. Qualities of true discipleship include unconditional surrender, obedience to the call of spreading the gospel, service, and unity. Bonhoeffer writes of costly grace, asserting that a radical reorientation of one's entire life in complete obedience to Christ demands a cost, self-denial, and sacrifice. For Bonhoeffer, and as we have seen in today's gospel passage, pursuing a connection with Christ demands a radical break from other loyalties and attachments, even those considered sacred or natural. Bonhoeffer asserts that our transformation into Christ's image is a lifelong journey dependent on the empowering grace of the Holy Spirit. That grace, once attained, is a source of true joy and liberation, inviting us into a profound relationship with Christ.

On the night before he died, in the Farewell Discourse, Jesus spoke of how his followers were to live when he was gone. We are to live in faith that we will see him again. We are to love one another as he has loved us. We are to learn and be comforted by the Holy Spirit. We are to live in unity with God and with one another.

And to do all this, it may be necessary to let go of what is familiar and of the world. The path is faith, full face on. The promise, the end of the journey, is salvation, resurrection, life eternal with the Holy One. Elisha, the followers of Jesus in Luke's gospel, Paul, the Galatians, all are disciples on the road, on the journey of faith.

Pope Francis wrote in his Easter message, days before he died to this world and greeted the Father, “All those who put their hope in God place their feeble hands in his strong and mighty hand; they let themselves be raised up and set out on a journey.” May we also set out on the journey of faith, even if it is difficult, even if we don't know where we are going. May we be guided by the Holy Spirit along the Way of Christ. Amen.

Susan Butterworth, M.A., M.Div., is a writer, teacher, singer, and lay minister. She leads *Song & Stillness: Taizé @ MIT*, a weekly ecumenical service of contemplative Taizé prayer at the interfaith chapel at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). She teaches writing and literature to college undergraduates and writes book reviews, essays, and literary reference articles.