

THE COSTS AND THE BLESSINGS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Series on Galatians - June 26th, 2016 - Proper 8

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

The scripture lessons this morning all deal in some fashion with the costs and the blessings of discipleship. In Luke, Jesus speaks and lives out the costs as he “sets his face toward Jerusalem”. For Jesus, it will be the task of modeling the unconditional cost that is sometimes demanded of a disciple. And Jesus never hid the potential costs from his followers, as this passage so pointed illustrates.

The section of the story about the prophets Elijah and Elisha from 2nd Kings is more reflective of the blessings of discipleship, although I suspect neither prophet lived what we would call a comfortable or pampered life. Yet the rewards of their devotion to God were that they felt continuously led by the spirit and were given some measure of spiritual power to act on God’s behalf within the world. When Elijah “passed the mantle” quite literally to Elisha, Elijah’s deepest and only request was for the same spirit and more that was embodied in his master.

In our passage from Galatians, Paul is also talking about the blessings of discipleship, though at times you wouldn’t know it from his harsh rhetoric. For Paul the greatest blessing was freedom, the freedom that was promised when you lived by the Spirit and you walked by the Spirit, freedom when you could live purely under the law of Love. Even in the face of the inevitable desires of the flesh, the spirit would always be there to help you resist and do battle with your baser nature. And in time, as you were open to its still small voice, that same Spirit will nurture within you the spiritual gifts of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

For many of us however, and it appears for many of those in church in Galacia, that seemed like more than an ordinary mortal could imagine or ever expect to attain. That was for the prophets and the apostles, but not the ordinary Christian. Unlike Paul, they had no dramatic transformation on the road to Damascus. Paul seemed astonished that his followers should fail to see their new freedom in Christ and should feel they needed to take on the Judaic laws of Moses. But I think we can understand. When you can't get your mind around an idea, when it seems beyond the scope of your imagination and your daily experience, it's normal to search for a back up plan that you can understand. As demanding and constant as the laws of Moses were, they were clear and achievable and they made you part of a group who would be there to make sure you obeyed them. What was slavery to Paul may have meant security for them. What was freedom for Paul may have felt scary and unachievable for them.

And what about you and me? Don't we sometimes read a scripture passage or recite a liturgy that we can't really imagine living out in "real time"? Yes, we are followers of Christ, yes, we are members of the priesthood of all believers, yes, we are stewards charged to do the work of the kingdom and live by the law of Love. I really believe that our hearts are right there, but like the Galatians, we can have a hard time believing we can actual live that reality. Our rational minds, our emotional guts, our threatened egos, all tend to scream out at the idea. You think you can do what? You're really expecting to hear still small voices the next time you come to a crossroads?

I have a confession. As you may have noticed already, I do well with "doing". My Puritan Calvinist guilt system is always pushing me to carry out Christ's command to serve, sometimes to my own detriment. However, I am also committed to "being"; to retreating inward and practicing the spiritual disciplines of contemplation, meditation, prayer and healing. What I have

difficulty with is doing them at the same time! And that's the rub for most of us. If we are going to truly "live by the Spirit and walk by the Spirit" then we must learn to bring that inner Spirit out into the world with us. Our minds may tell us we're being inefficient, our guts may get impatient and anxious for results, our egos may worry that how we are being judged, but if we are to truly be the church and truly be stewards for Christ, we have to learn to bridge that gap between "being" and "doing" within ourselves.

Recently we have been doing a lot of talking at Grace about stewardship. We have put up a poster listing some current short-term needs, we have shared a survey about on-going areas where people might be interested in becoming involved, and we have asked folks to consider making a personal promise to offer at least one gift of stewardship to the church as part of their annual pledge. Now I want to suggest a fourth challenge. I would like us to look at all the options and then try to give ourselves some breathing time with the Spirit and listen to what seems to actually have our name on it. Try not to be swayed by guilt from what you feel you should do or pressure from what others think you ought to do or even current need requests but just stay focused on actively following the movement of your own spirit. Let's try and make this one stewardship choice a spiritual exercise in bringing "being" and "doing" in harmony with each other.

And for those of you who might be saying to yourselves right now, "I can't do any of those things", I would ask you not to underestimate the Holy Spirit because there are no limits to love. And remember that "those things" may not be what the Spirit even calls you to claim. We may tend to think in the box but the Holy Spirit has such boundaries.

As an example, one of the most important stewards in my life was Mrs. Clark. Mrs. Clark had come to our church because she could no longer live on her own and had been forced to sell her home

and move in with her daughter. But her deepest sorrow was that her only grandchild had been recent hit by a car and killed. She grieved for her granddaughter but also grieved because there would be no birthdays, confirmations, graduations or marriages to look forward to and cherish. I was a eight year old girl who needed another grandmother and so we became stewards for each other. Every year, on her granddaughter's birthday, I received a book. Since we did not celebrate birthdays in my family, that was very special gift. But the greatest gift came on the day I was confirmed and she brought me a beautiful white bible, with a paper cover that was pressed to look like real leather and on the top was my own name printed in gold letters. It was one of the most memorable gifts of my life. Years later, when I planning to be married, someone ask me what kind of flowers I would be using in my bridal bouquet and suddenly the Spirit hit me. I knew I would not be carrying a bridal bouquet but instead carrying Mrs. Clark's little white bible because I knew this was an event she would not have wanted to miss.

Closing Poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

*When they had crossed, Elijah said to 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."
—2 Kings 2.9*

You who yearn for your master's spirit,
have you forgotten, it was already given to you?
Remember, you were plowing, doing your work,
and a prophet threw their mantle over you.
You already have the power
to do what you must do.
There will be times of whirlwind,
times of loss and chaos,
times when your leader and guide
is taken up in a chariot of fire —
but you still have the mantle.
You will strike the Jordan and it will part.
You will carry on the work of the prophet,
the work of Exodus, the work of justice.
In your own way you will do it;
you have been given your gifts, not another's,

not even a great leader's.
Look within.
What bears the fruit of love, joy and peace,
of patience, kindness, generosity,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?
Whatever in you bears this fruit,
nourish its roots and trust it.
Wear the mantle. Do the work.
Chariots of fire can't take it from you.
Wear the mantle.

Sermon preached on June 26, 2016
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