

Proper 8-C
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St. Stephen's, Spokane

I've been thinking a lot this week about priorities and about urgency. Maybe it's because I'm right in the middle of a home improvement project and the people doing the work sometimes have a different set of priorities and a different level of urgency about what is happening. I guess that's normal and natural in the world of home improvement. How soon will the dirt get moved? When will the plants be planted? We view those tasks with different eyes – different schedules – different priorities.

Of course the gospel today isn't about home improvement, but it is about priorities. It is about how important is Jesus' call in our lives. How are we being called to follow Jesus? Where does that come on the 'to-do' list of our lives?

There is kind of an edge to this Gospel reading. Jesus sounds brusque. He sounds blunt. It sort of sounds like Jesus having a complicated and intense day. This is also an important turning point in the Gospel as Jesus begins to move toward Jerusalem, (where he will eventually suffer and die).

It doesn't start off well. Along the way a Samaritan village rejects his planned visit. His disciples seem kind of ticked off (Let's call down fire on them!) and then Jesus rebukes them for wanting to seek revenge on those Samaritans – after all, he is heading to Jerusalem to undergo suffering, not to cause it.

As they move along toward another village, the conversation turns to following Jesus – really the meaning of discipleship. And it, too, is sort of a testy conversation. One disciple, enthusiastic to follow Jesus wherever he goes, gets, in response, an intense reality check: Do you really know what you are getting into? Jesus asks. It may remind us of some of the conversations we’ve had with our children or our friends as they’ve made important life choices. Have you really thought this through? Have you weighed your choice? Do you know how hard this is going to be?

When I was a young adult, a priest handed me a copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic book, “The Cost of Discipleship.” It’s a tough book – pulls no punches when it comes to the challenge of following Jesus. He talks about cheap grace and costly grace. Of the intensity – the urgency of being a disciple. I suppose that kind of a book runs the risk of being a turn-off. It describes the demands of a life of faith in no uncertain terms. I found this book absolutely compelling at that stage of my journey. I was just moving toward a more committed faith as a young mom still in my 20s. I loved the challenge. Diana Butler Bass describes that shift to commitment as moving from being a tourist to a pilgrim. A move from being along for the ride – and I guess the scenery – to one of seriously finding God in the journey. Sometimes it really helps to be honest and up-front when something is difficult. To just lay it out there.

When Jesus turns to his companions and says, “Follow me,” he hears a couple of excuses about why that can’t happen just now. I need to stick around until my father is buried. I need time to say my good-byes to the family, another one says. There is a part of me that understands these responses perfectly. Who wouldn’t need to take a moment to tend to family

– to process those important commitments. But Jesus’ requests trumps all of those things. He’s asking for undivided attention. Unquestioned priority. No excuses. If you are coming on this journey, drop everything and come along. There is shock value in the way this unfolds here. Nothing at all should impede the urgency of following Jesus. Tough stuff.

Jesus confronts their procrastination and, perhaps, ours. I don’t know about you, but I have a great capacity for procrastination. Piles of paper have been known to accumulate on my desk. E-mail sometimes goes unanswered. Sometimes I wait until conditions are just right before taking on a necessary task.

What Jesus is saying is that there isn’t time to sit around until everything is just right to be his follower. I’ll follow you once I get all of my kids through college.... I’ll follow you, but not until I clear the decks of some other things. I’ll follow you as soon as I get married and settle down....

I love Eugene Peterson’s version of Jesus’ response in this passage:

Jesus was curt: “Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know.”

Jesus said to another, “Follow me.”

And he said, “Certainly, but first excuse me for a couple of days. I have to make arrangements for my father’s funeral.”

Jesus refused. "First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God's kingdom."

Then another said, "I'm ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home."

Jesus said, "No procrastination. No backwards looks. You can't put God's kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day."

Wow!

When we listen to Jesus in either version of Luke, we hear urgency and single-mindedness. The disciples are called to an urgent mission and so are we. There are big expectations of those who would follow Jesus. There is an element of both risk and adventure in this journey. Sometimes we have to make new priorities – learn new things – respond in new ways. And as we practice this (and most of us do need practice) we grow into the life of a disciple, a follower of Jesus.

Frankly, this isn't what we hear all the time – or even want to hear. Often we feel like our plate is already full. Life is complicated and demanding already.

But there is also good news here: Those who choose to follow Jesus – who respond to this difficult and demanding call – become through their lives and ministries, a gift to the world. They are people who, as they follow Jesus, offer the gifts of compassion, healing, reconciliation, justice to the world. Who live with a unique set of priorities.

William Willimon, dean of the Duke University Chapel, tells a compelling story about the demands of the Gospel. A couple who lost their daughter in the tragedy at the World Trade Center in 2001 were interviewed by a television reporter shortly after September 11. They were in great grief. At the end of a brief exchange the reporter, perhaps sensing that he ought to say something before ending the conversation, said, “Well, er, I guess that you will be going to your place of worship this weekend to receive some consolation.”

The mother replied, “No. You see, our religion teaches that we ought to forgive our enemies. And we are just not ready for that right now.” They needed a time-out to respond in a way that had integrity for them. Willimon comments, “Now there was a woman who knew something of the perils of worshipping a God who has come to us specifically, concretely as a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus.” I would add to that that here was a woman who understood deeply some of the difficult demands of the gospel.

What does it look like for us? We’re not asked to heap our commitment to follow on top of an already full and demanding life. But instead our commitment to follow is a foundation. We build and shape our lives on top of it.

We do that remembering that Jesus calls us to a religion of the heart – a transforming faith that begins in God’s deep love for us that loves life into us. It calls forth our response of justice and compassion and hope – a longing for the reign of God, a freedom to relinquish our control. It is foundational.

“Follow me,” Jesus says. Are we ready?

