

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 30, 2013
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

I Kings 19:15-21
Psalm 16:5-11
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

I must confess that certain features of today's Gospel lesson don't set well with me. Certain details make me uncomfortable.

The passage begins at verse 51, which is a key verse in the whole Gospel. After spending enormous amounts of energy in the Gospel healing, teaching, and preaching, it is here where a shift occurs, and Jesus resolutely sets his face toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. Things now start to get really serious. Jesus now has his "game face" on and it's all business.

Maybe that's why I am uncomfortable. Here is Jesus, giving 110%, turning his whole heart and mind and soul toward the goal. It is radical commitment. It is radical obedience. It is complete submission of his life and his fate to the will of God.

Have you ever met someone with a rock solid determination to reach a goal? A commitment so deep that they poured all of their energy toward it? A passion that gave them a laser-like focus as they moved in the direction of the goal?

I have. And at times it has made me uncomfortable, because it forces me to look at the depth of my own commitments and priorities in life. It forces me to

reflect on what really matters to me, and how deeply I am committed to what matters.

Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Not merely “going” there – he is aimed there like some sort of guided missile. There is no turning back.

And Luke tells us there are three different kinds of reactions to this action of Jesus. First are the Samaritans, who learn that Jesus is going to Jerusalem and who therefore won’t even allow him into their village.

As serious as that sounds, the disciples’ reaction is even worse. They want to call down fire from heaven and burn their hated half-breed enemies up. Jesus says a stern “no,” however.

The other reactions come in response to Jesus’ invitation to follow him to Jerusalem. One person asks for permission to return home and bury his father. Another person asks permission to return and say good-bye to his family. Both requests seem quite innocuous (to me at least). These folks will follow Jesus as soon as they’ve buried loved ones and made appropriate farewells. You know, get your ducks in a row. Clean up some loose ends. That kind of thing.

Jesus’ response makes clear that this approach won’t work. Jesus expects these folks to drop their plans *now* and follow him.

Why does he do this?

Because of *where* he is going. He is on his way to Jerusalem. He is on a collision course with destiny. He is changing the world. He is overturning the powers of evil. *And anyone who cannot see this, who cannot allow **their** hopes and their dreams and their plans to be changed by it, does not have what it takes to be a disciple.*

And now I know why this text makes me so uncomfortable. It raises this very important question: **Does the grace and love of God made known to us in Jesus trump our plans and shape our lives, or do we shape our faith to fit the lives we've already planned?**

Most of us would agree that our families are very important to us. We value our family relationships above all others. Our families often are the top priority in our lives. That is, perhaps, as it should be.

Which is why Jesus' words here cut to the bone. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock puts it this way:

The radical nature of Jesus' words lies in his claim to priority over the best of human relationships, not the worst. Jesus never said to choose him over the devil. He said to choose him over the family. [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, Luke, p. 144.]

Jesus' words hit close to home in this text because he will not concede to me my desire to be in control. He demands that *his* mission come before all of my plans, even those that seem to me to be the most reasonable.

Why? Because he knows that we really are *not* in control of our own lives. We *think* we are in control, until a tornado, a wildfire, a diagnosis of cancer, an unforeseen tragedy, or any one of a hundred other things comes along and dashes our hopes and plans and brings us to ruin.

So what does Jesus do?

Typically, this would now be the place in the sermon where I've sufficiently laid the groundwork that I can now call on you to give over total control of your life to Jesus. But I'm not entirely sure that this passage is offering a clear cut choice between *us* being in control versus *Jesus* being in control.

When I think about what Jesus is about to do as he goes to Jerusalem, it occurs to me that Jesus does not go to Jerusalem to assume power or to "take charge." He goes to Jerusalem to suffer, to yield himself up, to thrust himself completely into an "out-of-control" situation, and to hold on and trust until he comes out on the other side.

New Testament scholar David Loese puts it like this:

Perhaps the promise of the Gospel is not that we can be in control, but rather that God in Jesus joins us in our out-of-controlness, holds onto us, and brings us to the other side... We invest a lot of time, energy, and money in being in control. And plenty of religious folks invite us to invest lots of time, energy, and money to surrender to God's control. Yet the world is still a terribly chaotic and unsettling place. So what if the deepest calling of a Christian disciple isn't to be in control – but rather to give up the illusion, to take some risks, and to throw ourselves into this turbulent life and world God loves so much, trusting that God will join us in the adventure, hold onto us through all the ups and downs, and bring us, in time, to the other side? [WorkingPreacher.org, June 24, 2013]

For some, this may not sound like much of a promise. But after several weeks without a home, after several months of chemo, after several years of addiction, after losing a job and searching for another one, or a hundred other things we could list – at least this promise sounds real and trustworthy.

And when I sometimes fail to allow Jesus' plans to trump my own plans and shape my life, I'm glad that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem not just *with me*, *but for me*. I'm glad that he has joined his life with ours, that he has thrown himself in with our chaotic and confused lot, and that he is holding onto us until he brings us out on the other side.

The bread and wine that await you this morning are a promise to you. They are a promise to you that when things in your life seem to border on being out of control, Jesus is holding onto you. He has a firm grip of love around you. And nothing can separate you from that love.

So come with faith. Bring the illusion of control with you, and leave it at this altar. Open your hands and heart to the voice of the One who invites you on his journey to Jerusalem. Strap yourselves in and hold on. It's quite a trip. And remember – you're not doing the driving!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.