

Introduction

I found this text to be a challenging text to be placed at this point in our liturgical calendar. It seems a text better suited for Lent than where we are now, just a short time after Easter. Just look at our first verse, verse 51, which seems to draw us into Easter reflections, “[Jesus] sets his face toward Jerusalem”. We are pulled into thinking about Jerusalem - where Jesus would have his last meal with his disciples, where he would be betrayed and be crucified, and where he would rise from the grave. It seems more appropriate for Lent than the last week in June.

But in reality, our lectionary places this text here intentionally. It is part of what we call *ordinary time* or the *Pentecost season*, but it is really anything but ordinary. It is the time in the church calendar when we focus more deeply on the various aspects of the Christian life while at the same time deepening our understanding of the kingdom as something we are living right now and pulling us into watchful expectation of the second coming of Christ.

Today is the 6th Sunday in this season of Pentecost and marks the beginning of a special section in Luke’s gospel which leads us, with Jesus, into a definitive focus on his journey toward his crucifixion - and this first verse is what opens it up to us: “Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem”.

The image is of Jesus in resolute and single-minded purpose while on his journey to his death and resurrection. We are invited to listen to an urgent message perhaps especially now as “[he] sets his face toward Jerusalem”, knowing (as we do) what lies ahead of Jesus once he finally does reach the city.

Body of Text*Jesus and the Samaritan Village*

Immediately after this statement in verse 51, after preparing us for the urgent message which follows, Jesus enters a Samaritan city. Now, the Samaritans and the Jews did not get along at all. It is a long, complicated, and mutually antagonistic relationship. Their dislike for each other goes all the way back to 722 BC when the Northern kingdom of Israel was conquered and scattered by the Assyrians.

The Samaritans were so disliked by the Jews that some who wanted to get from, say, Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the South, would actually cross the Jordan River to avoid Samaria and then cross back over the river again once they had passed Samaritan territory. It is a little like crossing to the other side of the road to avoid someone you don’t want to encounter – perhaps reminding us of the Good Samaritan story. There is irony in this, of course.

Contrary then, to this established bitterness between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus goes right into Samaria and looks for lodging there – a strong message to his followers and us...an urgent message, not so coincidentally occurring right after he “turns his face toward Jerusalem”.

It is not so surprising that Jesus is not received in the Samaritan village they are visiting, as he is Jewish, but the reaction of James and John *is* very surprising. They ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritans.

What were they thinking? This is one of those times when the disciples simply do not get it.

The mission of Jesus is to proclaim the gospel message of grace and to heal; not to punish and destroy. Jesus rebuked them for this talk. We see this more often in the gospels; the disciples, at times, seem clueless to the message of love and hope that Jesus brings. As I was thinking about this last week I realized that this holds an important message for us:

Even the disciples, who were with Jesus while he was on earth, took some time before they were able to understand his message – they needed to hear it from different angles, different perspectives, and in different contexts before they could grasp the radical nature of what Jesus was asking of them.

Our call is to wrestle with this message too but also to be gentle with ourselves as we struggle to gain insight into the deeper, radical call of the gospel. Today's text asks this kind of deeper reflection, but gently – recognizing that the disciples had difficulties with it too.

From the lens of a loving God this text seems meant to instruct us about God's view of inclusiveness. Jesus' rebuke of his disciples is to tell us how much the concept of inclusion matters to him.

Jesus is saying that even the most marginalized of people, even the Samaritans who the Jews really did not like at all, are invited to participate in God's kingdom promises. It is a message that helps us see the depth of inclusiveness that Jesus is asking us to consider. God's message has always been about embracing, joining, allowing, inviting, and the sharing the message of mercy and hope liberally with all people.

All are invited; really everyone is invited.

Confession and Forgiveness

And how do we move forward as inclusive people here at Zion, for instance?

For me it seems that humbly acknowledging our imperfection, our human brokenness, is the way to begin living into this invitation;

...recognizing that we are not in charge; that we do not have the control we sometimes think we do; that we are no better than anyone else; that we regularly fail to follow God's call for our lives; and that we cannot do it on our own...then we are on the way to being an inclusive group of believers.

We do not begin each worship service with *confession and forgiveness* by accident. It is part of our basic proclamation of being Christian; to remind each other each week of the depth of our brokenness and our absolute reliance on forgiveness, on God's mercy, and on the truly free gift of grace. That is how we begin each service, each Sunday, 52 weeks a year: our confession of sin and asking for God's forgiveness.

Being inclusive begins with this sort of utter humility – absolute reliance of the grace of God.

I suppose the difficult questions Jesus is asking us to consider are:

Who might we have excluded unjustly who we may ask forgiveness from? and,
Who can we forgive for excluding us unfairly?

Jesus reminds us that the clearest non-negotiables of his teachings in the Gospels are: to love your enemies and to forgive.

That's tough stuff right?

To Journey with Christ

We see here again that our journey with Christ is fashioned in the white-hot container of kingdom values: that is... self-sacrifice, self-giving, and self-forgetfulness. It is always costly and demanding to follow Christ.

I sometimes wonder whether there is really an untroubled encounter with God. There is the amazing, of course, but there is also the trying, the difficult, and the honest relationship of faith – and the call to follow God in all his disguises. “Where are you in this God?” often becomes our prayer during the trying situations of our lives.

We may expect a conquering, sword-wielding, fighter in a Messiah, like the Jews of that time did, but what we get is a Christ shrouded in weakness, vulnerability, and suffering; yet standing beside the forsaken, the marginalized, the wounded, and the dying - like in the story of the Good Samaritan and like the narrative of each of our lives.

So when Jesus asks us to follow him we learn from this text the implications of this, it is no small request. The three encounters which follow are testament to that.

Three Encounters

In the first encounter, someone who is following Jesus says, “I will follow wherever you go.” This sounds reasonable, something we ourselves might say; indeed, many have said exactly these words, I am sure. But to this, Jesus responds in a way we might not expect: “Foxes have holes, and birds have their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”

In the second encounter a man offers to follow Jesus but asks to bury his father first. Who of us would not do the same? Jesus responds again in a seemingly puzzling fashion, “Let the dead bury their own; but for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”

In the third encounter a person asks to first say goodbye to friends and family before leaving everything and everyone behind to follow Jesus. He just wants to say goodbye to his friends; it sounds totally reasonable. Here again Jesus’ answer is puzzling: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom.”

So, what do these encounters mean? I think these stories are statements of the resolve and the earnestness of Jesus and his mission and dream for the world, then and now. Just look at the world around us; look at creation (climate change – called *the most important theological issue of our time*), or look at how people treat each other (Orlando shooting, poverty, refugee crises, war).

God is weeping with us, and for us, in our wounds and our broken activities. Is it so surprising that Jesus would remind us of the radical nature of his message with such definitive requests to follow him? Does this message seem anything but absolutely urgent? “Love your enemies and forgive”. Again, just look around us.

And perhaps these stories are also asking us to look at aspects of our own discipleship activities, to look at ourselves, to see if they are more conditional than we are willing to admit. Are we really willing to leave behind *the world* to follow Jesus? I wonder whether we are sometimes not quite certain we want this Jesus who challenges and pushes; this Jesus who makes far-reaching demands on all parts of our lives; this Jesus who cannot, and will not, leave us as he found us.

And don’t look back at the furrows in the field, the third encounter. Having spoken with a few of you about this it seems clear that when one looks back after ploughing a straight furrow, the next piece, made while looking back, will not be so straight.

Instead, we are invited to pick out a spot in the distance and move toward it – that is our invitation to go out into the world in extraordinary ways, beyond our perceived boundaries, sometimes beyond our comfort zones – to embrace, to join, to allow, to invite, and to share the message of mercy and hope that is God’s invitation to us and to all people.

Conclusion

There is another tract here as well, and it should bring us great comfort. Following Christ also means that he is right beside us too.

Christ meets us exactly where we are, even as he invites us to expand our ministries beyond these so called *safe walls* of the church. In some ways this is a very scary proposition for us, but it is also an experience of God in the present moment – in the wounds and sorrow of the world, ok, but also in the joy, in the celebrations, and in the dance of life that are going on all around us, right in front of us, at all times.

Celebration is part of our life’s journey too; celebrating *God with us*. God is close at hand.

Just go for a walk around the river – watch the clouds roll by, look at the trees swaying in the wind, see families picnicking together, and children at play. God is right there in the immediacy of those moments and right here, right now, too. There is something unbearably beautiful unfolding everywhere around us.

This is the message of grace.

There is no person who God does not stand beside and offer gushing rivers of healing and mercy. There is no trap that we set for ourselves that is too strong for God to break.

God implores us to follow on this sometimes difficult journey but then tells us not to fear over and over again in the bible, he is with us on every step along the way.

We are not alone, never alone, and the mystical presence of the Holy Spirit whispers to us from deep within our souls that we are beloved, that we are important, that we are all children of God. Amen