

The Third Sunday after Pentecost

June 26, 2022

1 Kings 19:9-21

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Luke 9:51-62

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alarm bells, a wake-up call, a rude awakening, a reality check, a smack upside the head, a kick in the rear, a corrective action, a trumpet call: whatever one wants to call it, we all need it once in a while. Pearl Harbor served as a turning point, not just in the national life of America, but in the lives of so many individual young Americans who joined in the struggle against Japan and later against Germany. A generation later, the perception of the idyllic America of the 1950's gave way to the reality of a decade which included the assassinations of JFK in '63, Malcolm X in '65, then Martin Luther King in April and Robert Kennedy in June of '68. Couple that with the war in Vietnam and the real threat of racial conflict in the streets of America, and the 1960's marks a time of remarkable upheaval. Each notable event witnessed can give us perspective on what to value, what to fight for, and what to fight against.

In my lifetime, there are two formative events that stand out. First is the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dismantling of the Soviet Union which introduced a new world order. Not in the right-wing conspiracy sense. In the sense that the world I was growing up in would not be the same from then on. I was in my early teens when I first looked upon a section of the Berlin Wall at the Nixon Library, and even though I was quite young, I knew I was looking at real significant history. And, of course, the defining moment for my generation came on September 11, 2001. I was working away at my job in the machine shop just as I would any other Tuesday morning, but by the end of that day, I knew that the world was forever changed. We can all pinpoint singular moments in our lives that serve as milestones; events seared into our memories which shaped our understanding of the world around us.

In the gospel reading today, the disciples were waking up to the reality of a changed world, and they were getting ahead of themselves. Jesus' ministry was gaining steam. Still, Christ was under no illusion as to what He had to be prepared for, and He tried to get His band of disciples prepared as well. Setting His face like flint toward Jerusalem, Jesus knew that there was no turning back from the path chosen for Him, and He walked it willingly. Once, the disciples were witnesses to a life-changing Divine spectacle on a mountain. As remarkable as the Transfiguration was, it was a somber occasion, one in which Jesus, Moses, and Elijah had convened to discuss Jesus' death. Everything the disciples had known over the last months and years with Jesus would soon be thrown into the blender of injustice. "Listen to what I am about to tell you: the Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men."¹ On His way to Jerusalem, Jesus would encounter hostility from those outside of Judea and Galilee.

Samaria had a bad reputation with the people of Israel and vice versa. More than a mere theological dispute, Samaritans and Jews were known to have violent conflicts between them. Sometimes, these conflicts would result in prolonged struggles leading to the deaths of many on

¹ Luke 9:44

both sides. On one occasion, around 48 A.D., some Galileans were traveling south toward Jerusalem, through Samaria, on their way to celebrate Passover at the Temple. Some Samaritans attacked and murdered one Galilean. After the festival, many Jews, both Galileans and Judeans, went on an unauthorized revenge mission and indiscriminately slaughtered any Samaritans they came across. The rulers of Jerusalem ran out in sackcloth and ashes, begging the rogue vigilantes to cease their destruction lest greater harm be done.² Such skirmishes were all too common in the region during the decades before and after the ministry of Jesus. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that the Samaritans would react in an unwelcoming way to a sect of Jews making their way to Jerusalem at Passover, especially when the group was feared as a potential rebel militia, led by their Messiah, and loudly speaking of the coming new Kingdom.

James and John thought it would be a good idea to call down fire upon the unfriendly towns, as if they had any business doing so. The last prophet to call down fire on an unfriendly host was Elijah, and the new Elijah, John the Baptizer, had already come and been put to death by Herod.³ Besides that, the proper role of the prophet is primarily to speak the truth of God's Law and mercy, while interceding on behalf of the people who are in danger. This is what Abraham did for Sodom and Gomorrah and what Moses did for the people of Israel.⁴ In their messianic excitement, the disciples became a little too zealous and there was a stern rebuke awaiting them.

We are not told what the rebuke consisted of, so we can assume Luke didn't think it was of critical importance. A stern rebuke from Jesus would be enough to shake anyone to their core, especially when it comes in the face of arrogance and over-confidence. The same force that was brought to bear on demons and illnesses confronted the disciples, and their useless threats ceased. The reality check was harsh, and the disciples needed it.

A reality check - we all need a reality check at times. Our arrogance can lead us to mistreat people, to feel as though we can get away with anything, or worse, that we can do no wrong. We covet what belongs to others - spouses, possessions, achievements. Readily would we take from others in order to have what we desire with little regard for how it hurts them. In our unrighteousness, we would even call down fire on anyone and everyone who failed to meet our standards, who insulted us where it hurts most, and who pierced our self-delusions and lies. Christ calls us to a better way.

Here is the reality that was confronting the disciples - the Truth was standing before them figuratively and literally. The Kingdom of God was breaking forth, and it was expected to grow exponentially. Such growth could hardly happen if the neighboring Samaritans were wiped out. Jesus wanted them alive. In this context, the parable of the Good Samaritan, which follows this series of events, was intended for the self-righteous disciples just as much as the scribe who asked Jesus about eternal life. The disciples needed to hear that goodness could be found in unexpected places, and it is not Christ-like to exclude individuals or groups from the Kingdom for failing to reach your ideals. In fact, morality and goodness just might be found outside of your ideals and prejudices. The Kingdom is expansive, much larger than we can fathom. And Christ is at work,

² Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, 2.12.5

³ Matthew 14:6-12

⁴ Genesis 18:16-33; Exodus 32:9-13

drawing people from all quarters of the globe, seeking and saving the lost. The righteousness of Jesus stands in stark contrast to the attitudes of James and John and us.

It is the nature of the Kingdom to grow, to bring in those who were outcast and marginalized. As the Kingdom was growing, the number of those who were to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah increased as well. Word must have been on the street that Jesus was looking for a few good men, those fit for the mission at hand. Jesus had sent out the twelve on an evangelistic journey, and now the number He intended to send was multiplying. We are told of three specific cases. Jesus had two men petition Him to join in the Kingdom proclamation, and there was one man whom Jesus called. We learn something a little different from each of the three.

First, let us look at the man who told Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” At first glance, following Jesus might have seemed like an exciting gig. The disciples were casting out some demons and healing the physically ailing. There was at least an underlying rumor of war, and Jesus was just unfashionable enough among the elites to be considered rebellious, but He remained very good. His life was a testimony against the self-elevated and secure. So, Jesus responds by reminding the potential follower that to follow Christ means to give up one’s former attachments. The implication of the saying, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” is that from here on out, Jesus Himself would not have a home. The truth of this is seen in the preceding rejection at Samaria.

Next, Jesus asked a man to follow Him. This man wanted to bury his father first. Most people are aware of the first part of Jesus response, “Let the dead bury their own dead.” On the surface, to our Western ears, it sounds as if the father has died and needs to be buried, and Jesus is rebuking the man for his devotion to the burial rite. But this doesn’t make sense within the historical or cultural context. Jews buried their dead on the day they died. So, it is not as if the man had gone out to Jesus and forgotten that a funeral was taking place. There are two other possibilities that make more sense to me. One is that the father was already in a tomb, but the son was awaiting the time of the second burial, when the bones would be removed and placed into a familial ossuary. If this is the case, the man could have been asking for a delay of months, not hours, far too long to wait when eternal life is at stake.⁵

Another possibility is that the father is still alive which would make sense of what Jesus tells the man, “But you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God.” It is the spiritually dead who were to bury their own, but those who had life in Christ were to proclaim the gospel to the living. Jesus wasn’t diminishing the importance of burial which was considered a great act of mercy in His culture. He was reminding this man that the Kingdom was to be proclaimed, even if there are other obligations to tend to.

Last, apparently not grasping the urgency of the matter, a third man approached Jesus but he wanted to say goodbye to his family first. And Jesus responded, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.” That must have felt like a slap in the face.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press), 205.

What we learn from these three men is there is only One who is truly fit for service in the Kingdom of God, but Jesus calls us anyway. Christ is the one who put His hand to the plow and didn't look back, following the road to Jerusalem and then to his death. He is the One who tended to the dead and dying while proclaiming the Kingdom to the lost. Christ is the One who left His heavenly home to be rejected by the very people He came to redeem, shunned from their villages, tortured by their cruel devices, and crucified on their scandalous cross. He is the one who went to His death, finally being shown an act of loving-kindness by Joseph and Nicodemus, both of whom were Pharisees. For the disciples, seeing Jesus, their hope and salvation, arrested, beaten, and hung on a tree to die must have been shocking. It is the kind of event that can't ever be shaken from one's mind. So too, when they witnessed the resurrected Christ in their midst, there was no way to contain their excitement. They couldn't help but proclaim the Kingdom of God in the crucified and resurrected Christ.

While it is true that no one is truly worthy to be called into His Kingdom and proclaim Him as King, it is also true that, having been forgiven by Christ, we are made worthy in Him. All our failings have been overcome in His fidelity. Our reluctance to follow Jesus, whatever the cost, is transformed into an imitation of His steadfast dedication to us. We follow Him because we have nowhere else to go. Our wake-up call draws us from a dark slumber to the reality of restoration and freedom. Restored from the wreckage our sins caused, freed from the bonds of slavery and death, we can follow Him as we are, as He has called us. We can put our faith in the truth that He is shaping us into what He wants us to be. As He shapes us, His love, mercy, and righteousness will manifest in us, making us more of what He is; good, true, and beautiful.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.