

Sermon for Proper 8C
Sunday, June 26, 2022
“No excuses”

Texts: Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning’s gospel lesson can be somewhat difficult to get our minds around. It’s very short, but it says many things about discipleship, about what it means to follow Jesus, and the sacrifices that we as disciples might face. Right from the beginning, Jesus and his disciples are confronted with rejection by the people of a Samaritan village. You may recall, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. In fact, they weren’t even supposed to talk to each other or associate with each other. And not only that, Samaritans considered the town of Shechem to be their capital where their temple was located, not Jerusalem. So Jesus and his followers were not making a good impression when he made it clear that he was headed to Jerusalem. Then we have that exchange between two people who intend to follow Jesus. One says, “I’ll follow you, Jesus, but first let me go bury my father.” And Jesus quickly tells him to let the dead bury their own dead. Harsh words to hear in a culture where not giving a person a proper burial among the one’s ancestors would have been one of the greatest dishonors imaginable. Not only that, Jesus tells another potential disciple not to even say goodbye to his family, just leave them right then and there.

But following Jesus is serious business. Following Jesus requires sacrifice. In our modern-day experience, we really don’t feel the gravity of the idea of following a radical, countercultural preacher. For Jesus and his disciples, following him meant challenging the very fabric of religious and cultural life, not because they were doing anything wrong in theory, but because they were challenging “the way things were,” they were bucking the status quo. The people who heard the written Gospel of St. Luke many decades later faced persecution and risked their very lives when they testified to being Christian, so this passage had very profound meaning for them and just how seriously they were to take their faith. Jesus made it clear that following him must be done fully and with no excuses.

Often when God calls us to something, we make all kinds of excuses for why it’s not the right time: “I’m too busy with work...I just started a new job...I have family obligations...I don’t have enough education...I’m not a good speaker...I don’t have the energy...I’m too young...I’m too old...I’m too tired...I have a past.” But Jesus said, “No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” God doesn’t want us to make excuses about why we shouldn’t be good disciples; he wants us to trust that he has already given us what we need to be just that.

As disciples, we are also challenged to be countercultural in our own time. When voices in our culture tell us that it is ok to discriminate against someone because of their

race, ethnic or national origin, religion, economic status, sexuality, gender identity, eye color, choice of clothing, whatever, we Christians are to be countercultural and say, “No, this isn’t right.” We are called to love and respect everybody, regardless of whatever ways they identify themselves and regardless of the choices they make, even when we disagree with those choices. Jesus has called us to put our hand on the plow and keep our eyes focused on tilling the ground, showing the world what it means to love and respect one another unconditionally. And we are to do this without any expectation of praise, honor, acceptance, a thank you, or even a pat on the back. We are just supposed to do it and live it, and not be distracted by or derailed off course by false prophets and false truths.

And living the Christian life isn’t just about how to love and treat others; it also defines how we should live and be from day to day. This is reflected in what St. Paul says to the Church in Galatia many years later. In today’s Epistle lesson, we find Paul talking about vices and values—the do’s and don’ts of Christian living—starting first by not being slaves to the law, but rather by sticking to what’s essential about the law. At the time of Jesus, many Jewish leaders and preachers were making the law, the Torah, the end in and of itself; the law had essentially become an idol—the law had become like a god. By Paul’s time even the early Christians were making the Torah—or particular commandments in the Torah—the focus of Christian identity. Instead, Paul tries to recenter them by writing that Christians are supposed to live lives of virtue, and that anything which became so important to a person that it replaced love for God and neighbor, anything that would overshadow attention to God was a vice. Paul pointed out that life in Christ was a new life, different from life as they otherwise knew it, not being a slave to the law, but rather, by being a slave to Christ. In other words, life in Christ means having the freedom to be a slave to one another in love—not being given to self-indulgence. Paul’s message also said that although Christ’s work of salvation was indeed complete, but Christians must not just rest on their laurels, but get up and do something with that. First, Christians must let go of those things that become idols in our lives—those would be the works of the flesh: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, “and things like these.” And then, Christians must take on the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul’s list of do’s and don’ts couldn’t be more timely and relevant for our present time. We live in a society that is very much like the Galatian church. Our society seems to value individualism and personal needs over the needs of society. It’s all about the self. What’s going to benefit me? How can I keep more of my money for myself? What is my right to own a gun, even though we hear of terrible gun violence terrorizing our streets and communities? How can I shut out the voices of people who say things or

believe things I don't agree with? How can I make sure that my religious opinion becomes the law of the land? Our national political system is utterly gridlocked by folks who want it their way or no way at all. Our churches are at odds with each other because we're so focused on the right reading of scripture that we can't just simply love each other because we share the love of Christ within us. Even church folk can't love each other and interact with each other, because we can't get over our our egos. Yes, we are living in a time and in a world that is just as off base as the Galatians. Paul gave the Galatians a way to get back to the basics and look ahead toward a new, perfect life in Christ.

The list of works of the flesh that Paul gives in Galatians 5 are extremes. Drinking alcohol isn't a bad thing, but overdrinking and getting drunk is. Sexual expression between two adults who care about and honor each other isn't bad, but when sex becomes objectified and the idol, then it's bad. Desiring things isn't bad either; we might want a better education or aspire a better job to make life better for ourselves and our families—today we will be honoring our young graduates who are doing exactly that! But it's when our desires become the be all and end all of everything, that is bad. That's the vice that Paul was talking about. Too often the church, many preachers, have used that list to preach against and demonize things and people in a way that is certainly not loving. Rather, anything that we do to such an extreme that we can't show God's love is a work of the flesh—even if it's religion itself.

Instead we must embrace the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Can you imagine how much better our lives would be if we showed love and peace, patience and kindness to each other? Can you imagine how much more we would be at peace if we practiced self-control with the folks we don't like or agree with? Can you imagine how much better our communities would be if we showed more patience, generosity, gentleness, kindness toward each other? What if our politicians actually focused on the fruits of the Spirit in their decision making? Hot button issues like gun control might not even be an issue. We wouldn't be arguing over people's civil rights—it wouldn't matter if you were Latino, black, immigrant, gay, transgender, female, physically challenged, mentally challenged; all would be treated equally as children of God, equally worthy of the American Dream. What if our world leaders stopped thinking about themselves and their own country's self interest and modeled for the world's citizens what it means to recognize that we are connected to each other in so many complex ways, and what affects me also affects you? Wars would cease and nations would support each other collectively to make this world a better place and help all who live in it survive. The environment, the economy, mutual respect. What if we lived in a world where we all lived together in love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

The Christian life is a different life in which we let go of those things that keep us from loving God and each other. That's what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Galatians. That's what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel lesson. It means living in a way that's different from the way the world thinks we should live without being distracted or derailed by the tendencies and ways of the world. It means letting go of the works of the flesh, of self-indulgence, of self interest, and to live in such a way as to show that all of God's children matter and deserve to be loved and respected. We do it and we don't look back, because that's just the way Christians are. Rather than indulge in the vices of the world, let us indulge in one thing: let us indulge in the fruits of the Spirit and be the wonderful people that God knows we are. Amen.

Resource

Mikeal C. Parsons, "Commentary on Luke 9:51-62,"

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2911