

“Tough Going”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, June 27, 2010
Scripture: Luke 9:51-62

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Jesus Christ, God’s only son, as we think about God’s word to us today, give us your wisdom and grace. Amen*

Surely you don’t need for me to tell you that we are in the season of summer. It might not be as hot as it was in Belize, but it is hot, isn’t it? For us summer is often a time of journeying. All year long – while we are taxiing our children from here to there – while we attend PTA meetings, and soccer and softball and swimming and cheerleading and football activities – we look forward to summer. We long for what the words of that old song said – “the lazy, hazy, crazy days of summer”. It is as though we “set our faces toward” the places to which we plan to vacate.

That being the case, our gospel lesson this morning from Luke’s gospel might be particularly appropriate. The difference is, however, that while we set our faces towards places of rest and relation and fun and enjoyment, Jesus is setting his face “to go to Jerusalem”. And while our journeys are ones to which we look forward, Jesus knows his journey will be filled with conflict, confrontation and death.

It comes as no surprise to us that Jesus encounters rejection on his way to Jerusalem. After all, from the first, from his temptation in the wilderness, from his first sermon in Nazareth, Jesus has been opposed. In fact, he appears to have preached away more people than he has won. So when these Samaritans oppose him, it’s really no surprise. And it’s no surprise either that some of his disciples ask Jesus if they can bring down fire and punish these unwelcoming Samaritans. They just want Jesus

to give them back some of the rejection they have given him.

Jesus refuses to allow this proposed rejection of the Samaritans. Instead, he turns upon those who accept him and want to be his followers. We might think that since Jesus has been rejected so many times in so many places, he might lower the bar a bit and be willing to take whoever shows up. But no, he raises the bar, calling on would-be followers to reject home, family, and possessions and follow him.

Sometimes churches put some catchy, appealing slogans on their buildings – “The church of friendly folks and warm hearts,” one sign says. Another says, “Hurting? Jesus cares. This is a place of healing.” And yet another says, “You’ve got questions? We’ve got answers. Come join us.” The good news is that Jesus will not let us get away with that. His way is a way that leads to a cross. There are great gifts, true, but there are also numerous challenges and demands

And you know what? I’m not sure how well those catchy signs work. I say that because I don’t think people come to church just to be served. There may be a few I admit. But for most of the people I know, and I include myself, our faith challenges us not when we are at our worst but at our best. It is then that our Christian conviction calls on us to choose against those things which seem best in human wisdom, insight and emotion. Then we are challenged to remember that the very good is the worst enemy of the best. That’s when it gets tough. That’s when we wrestle long and hard. That’s where the three encounters in our gospel lesson this morning come into play.

First, I am sure you felt as I did as I read Luke’s words: Jesus seems remarkably short-tempered and grouchy with these three would-be disciples. After all, it doesn’t really seem that they are asking for anything out of the ordinary. Am I the only one who wanted to say

to Jesus, “Lighten up, for crying out loud!”?

The challenge in understanding these conversations and seeing how they apply to our own lives arises from the fact that they come to us from two centuries ago, in a different language and culture, in a place half-way around the globe. As we hear and see these stories through our own cultural lenses, understanding them is not always easy.

Consider the first dialogue. Someone volunteers to join Jesus’ group, but like most people in first century Palestine, his idea of the Messiah probably doesn’t include a suffering, rejected and crucified savior. And while Jesus doesn’t reject him outright, he tries to show this would-be volunteer just what is in store for him should he decide to follow him.

But, my friends, there is a second level to the dialogue. We’re familiar with the association of nations with certain birds and animals: for instance, the United States with the eagle, England with the lion, Russia with the bear, China with the dragon. Well, in the first century the Gentile nations including Rome, were referred to as “birds of the air” and members of the Ammonite nations were called “foxes”. So when Jesus tells this would be follower that “foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”, what he is saying is that everyone is at home in Israel except the one who truly is Israel. The overlords and their puppets have palaces, but God’s Anointed has nothing. And what Jesus is warning this man about is that his becoming one of Jesus’ followers will mean his having nothing, too.

The second conversation might be a bit more troubling to us. The man in this part of the story is also interested in following Jesus but asks to first have time to bury his father. Those of us in the west – scholars and laypeople alike, hear these words and assume that the man’s father has just died or is on his deathbed. So

when Jesus says, “no”, we wonder how Jesus can be so insensitive. Middle Eastern readers of the New Testament, though, do not have that reaction. You see, they observe that if the man’s father really had just died he’d be sitting in mourning rather than hobnobbing with travelling teachers. They point out, too, that the phrase “to bury one’s father” has a long history as an expression for doing one’s sacred duty of remaining at home until one’s parents are respectfully buried.

Now that could be years or even decades down the road. The man is trying to balance Jesus’ call against peer pressure. “Jesus,” he says, “my community and my family have certain expectations of me. I will follow you after I have performed my duties. Surely you don’t expect me to violate those community standards.” And Jesus replies, “That is precisely what I expect. Let the spiritually dead surround themselves with empty tradition. The living need to choose the present reality of God’s kingdom.”

Then, finally, we come to the third would-be volunteer who seems, too, to have a reasonable situation. He simply asks permission to go home and say farewell to his family. While “farewell” isn’t necessarily a bad translation, a better translation would be, “let me go home and take my leave”. What’s the difference? Well, you see, in the Middle East, the person leaving always asks permission while the person remaining says “goodbye” or “go with God”.

And when this conversation was between parents and son was more than a formality. In this story the man was truly asking permission and everybody – including Jesus – knew that no father in his right mind would give his son permission to follow Jesus on some cock-a-mamie adventure.

So, let’s think about this for a minute. The man told Jesus he wants to follow him knowing darn well that his father will not give

his permission. Isn’t it always easy to agree to do something when you know that someone over you – a parent, a teacher, a supervisor, the Session – will overrule you? I can’t help but remember the number of times my daughters would say to someone on the phone, “I would love to, let me ask my Mom”, the whole time looking earnestly at me and shaking her head no.” For over 1000 years Arabic translations of this story in Luke’s gospel have read, “let me go and explain my case to those in my house.” The question this man really has of Jesus is, “surely you aren’t claiming greater authority over me than my parents” and Arab seminary students still cringe when studying this passage because that is exactly what Jesus is saying- there is no higher authority than his!

The relationship between a teacher and disciple is much more than simply signing up for a course. It is a lifetime commitment, a deep and lasting relationship which fundamentally changes the master and the disciple. That’s the relationship into which Jesus invites us. Here we have three potential disciples and three disturbing questions. We don’t know how the would-be disciples answered. But then again it, it doesn’t really matter. It’s not about them anyway. It’s about us – you and me. Jesus is saying three things to us (1.) The cost of discipleship is too high for us to be born into or fall into willy-nilly, (2.) Jesus will not accept our giving stronger loyalty to someone or something else over him and (3.) He will not allow any other voice to speak louder or carry more weight than God’s.

While at first glance Jesus’ words to his would-be disciples sound harsh and unreasonable, his intention is simply to be honest about the demands and the cost of a commitment we sometimes make too easily or take too lightly. But here’s the thing – Jesus believes that as tough as the going might be, we can choose the best over the merely very good. May it be so

for you and for me. Amen.

Thanks to Ross Bartlett for his sermon, “The Cost of Discipleship”, and William Willimon for his comments on this passage in “Pulpit Resource”.

“Tough Going”

A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 27, 2010

Luke 9:51-61



The First Presbyterian Church
of Dunedin

455 Scotland Street

Dunedin, Florida 34698

(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297

WEBSITE: fpcdunedin.org

E-mail: officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com

Victoria ByRoade, Pastor