

Jesus and the Would-Be Disciples

When I found out that this would be the Gospel lesson for the day I was scheduled to preach, I thought, "Lord, how did I get stuck with this passage? Maybe I'll preach from the Epistle lesson in Galatians; it's easier."

But King Jesus said, "Preach the Gospel lesson."

And Tom Fool said, "But I don't like the Gospel lesson. I like the Galatians passage."

But King Jesus said, with a Gandalfian twinkle in his eye, "He or she who chickens out and preaches on the easier lesson is not fit for the Kingdom of God."

And Tom Fool said, "Great. OK, so I'll preach on the Gospel. But where do I start?"

And the Lord said, "Maybe ask yourself why it is that you don't like this text. Start there."

So help me out here, friends. Why do I, and I suspect the question is, why do WE, resist and draw back from this passage? When a friend of mine heard this text, she said, "Hmph! Jesus' responses are completely unreasonable." So, here's my list:

1. The Samaritans, like some modern day Shiites and Sunnis, or some Christians and Muslims, cannot overcome their religious prejudices long enough to offer simple hospitality to needy travelers. It's a minor thing, but it bothers me.

2. James and John behave like wrath-o-God, self-righteous fundamentalists: "Let's call down fire from heaven in the form of drone strikes and wipe those suckers out!" But Jesus is not the damn-the-Samaritans Messiah his disciples

think he is, so he rebukes not-yet-Saint John and not-yet St. James (and I do like it that he rebukes them).

3. Jesus sounds mean to three potential converts to his cause. I don't remember reading about this approach to winning friends and influencing people in Dale Carnegie or Norman Vincent Peale! Instead of welcoming them on the journey, he makes being a disciple hard.

4. And isn't it harsh when Jesus says, "Let the dead bury their dead"?

5. Jesus appears to be anti-family. You can't even go home and say goodbye.

6. Jesus' responses seem, yes, unreasonable, and we apparently think we have a right to a reasonable Jesus. Isn't that, after all, one of the three legs of the Anglican stool, along with Scripture and tradition? (sometimes I think it is even larger than the other two).

Does that about cover it for you too? What else? (one or two responses from the congregation)

OK, now for a little background. Luke had deliberately constructed this story with certain overtones from the Elijah story, of which we have a part in our Old Testament lesson. Elijah was soon to be taken up into heaven on that fiery chariot. And Luke comments that the days were drawing near when Jesus would be taken up, though his method was a whole lot more painful. For first he would be taken up on the Cross. So things are getting very serious now. Just a few verses earlier in *this chapter*, Jesus said, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected, and be killed." So, apparently becoming a Jesus-

follower could be dangerous. Maybe Jesus was doing that would-be disciple a favor then when he turned him away.

We also have in the Elijah story the call of Elisha who will take Elijah's place as the main prophet of his time. Elijah calls Elisha, just as Jesus calls one of the would-be followers in our text. Elisha asks for a break to go home to kiss his father and mother before he follows Elijah. So Elijah says, "Who's stopping you?" So Elisha goes home, wraps up his affairs, gives his wealth to the people, and becomes Elijah's servant. But Luke portrays Jesus as tougher than Elijah. No going home first!

All right, back to the Gospel lesson. What happened to those "three stooges," the three would-be disciples? The first one tells Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus tells him, "There are no B&B's along the way, not even a Motel 6. They don't leave the light on for ya. Life on the road is hard. Are you ready for that?" And what does our first inquirer do? (look at the text) We don't know.

Stooge #2. This time Jesus calls the man, "Follow me." He is willing, but first wants to go home and bury his father. Now, what's wrong with that?! Then I got to thinking: maybe his father isn't even dead yet! It might be a while, and these funerals are a bear to plan, and there's all the relatives and the food . . . O vey!" And Jesus interrupts, "Let the dead bury the dead, but you go and proclaim God's kingdom!" So, what did the man do? (look in the story) We don't know.

Finally, the third would-be disciple. He wants to follow Jesus, but like Elisha, he wants to go home first and say goodbye to his family. And Jesus tells him, "No one who first puts his hand to the plow, and looks back, like Lot's wife, and then thinks, 'What about my season's tickets to the symphony? Well, maybe after my health improves, maybe when my retirement account is a little healthier,

maybe when I have more spare time, maybe when the kids are grown, maybe after college, maybe when it's more convenient to be a disciple, then I'll follow Jesus' - and so the King says, "Such a person is at this moment unfit for the rule and reign of God." And so, what did the third guy do? Right, we don't know.

And why don't we know? I think it is because Luke wants to leave these three stories open-ended, just like his story of the prodigal son's elder brother. He never tells us if the older brother decides to join the forgiveness celebration or to party on with his own self-righteous indignation. Luke leaves that ending open, so that we the readers, we the listeners, have to decide what *our response* would be. So too here, in this difficult Gospel text. Will *we* follow Jesus wherever he goes, or do we have our reasons, our good reasons, whatever they are, for not taking up our cross daily right now and following him.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer liked this text, and you can understand why. He was running an underground, illegal seminary for German pastors who would preach against what Hitler and the SS were doing. He made the hard choice to follow Jesus, and it cost him his life. Was he a fool? He could have continued to pastor his Lutheran church in England or stayed on in New York to teach at the seminary. But he went back into the crisis. Maybe this text is only for crisis moments, not for life on Whidbey Island. Bonhoeffer was facing the Nazis. We face long lines at Payless.

OK, that's not quite fair, is it? We all have crisis moments. We all come to grips with pain, grief, suffering, and death, in our lives and in the lives of our loved ones. And some of us have before us hard choices, perhaps even the choice of vocation. What will I still do with the one life I have been given? What is God's will for me, now and for the future?

So, *is* this a text for us?

How will we respond to it, besides wishing it wasn't there?

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