

Year C Pentecost 3 Resolutely Set Your Face Luke 9 vv51 to 62

This Gospel story seems a bit of a hodge podge of tidbits sewn together into the narrative by Luke. It is, though, quite a thorough commentary about life in God's arriving kingdom and our role in that life as followers of Jesus.

Luke begins today by telling us that Jesus is setting his face toward Jerusalem. Jesus has already told his disciples of his coming death at the hands of the religious authorities and those authorities are found in Jerusalem. Jesus is knowingly, resolutely, looking toward the future and, for him, that future holds death. But Jesus is not focused on that more immediate future. Today, Luke tells us that Jesus skips over the death and resurrection part of things and goes to the more distant future, the end of the big events – the ascension. “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” Although we tend to focus heavily on Jesus' death and resurrection as the acts that save us, it is his ascension into heaven that sets the stage for us to be given the gift of the Holy Spirit – Jesus' continued presence within us in his physical absence from us. It is the Holy Spirit who teaches us, guides us, and allows us to be the love of God in the flesh for a broken world. In short, it is the Holy Spirit who reveals God's kingdom, and helps us to reveal God's kingdom, as it is revealed to us today in Luke's Gospel story.

Jesus' first stop along the way to Jerusalem is a Samaritan village. Samaritans and Jews were very closely related to each other. Their point of difference lay in the beliefs about where to worship God and this difference ran deep. The Jewish people believed that God's dwelling place was in the Temple in Jerusalem whereas the Samaritans had worshipped God at Mount Gerizim. Tensions between the two peoples had intensified when, in 128 BC, Jewish soldiers had destroyed the Samaritan sanctuary at Mount Gerizim.

It likely came as no surprise to Jesus, then, that his overtures had been rejected by the people of this Samaritan village. Of importance, though, is the fact that Luke does not paint all Samaritans with the same brush. Luke tells us that they moved on to another village – almost certainly another Samaritan village. We also know that Luke includes Samaritans in the salvation through Jesus because of the high regard for the compassion and hospitality we find in Luke's story of the Good Samaritan. It is important to note that Jesus sends overtures to this village in the first place. Samaritans are included in his mission to reveal God's kingdom to the world.

James and John have an interesting and extreme reaction to the rejection by the Samaritan village. When the villagers make it clear that they do not want to hear Jesus' beliefs about God, James and John say to Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" It is James and John who have recently had the argument about who will be greater when God's kingdom fully arrives. Although they are loyal disciples of Jesus, they are still very much caught up in the way the world thinks of power. And the way the world deals with the power struggle between groups of people who hold differing beliefs and outrightly reject the beliefs of the other is to attempt to do away with the opposing group.

James' and John's desire to destroy the offending Samaritan village by raining fire down on them is a confident display of the authority they know they have through Jesus but it is a wrongful display of this authority, tainted by the world's thinking.

While their urge to destroy the village seems extreme to us because of its use of supernatural power to accomplish the destruction, they are actually not far off the mark of the tainted displays of authority that occur in our world daily...hourly. From the bombs destroying the lives of Ukrainians, the gunfire cutting down thousands in

various African countries to the school yard bully kicking out the feet of the non-athletic smart kid to the hateful, hurtful comments typed out behind the anonymity of a screen on social media platforms like Twitter and Tik Tok. Worldly thinking encourages a desire for power and control and, when people don't agree with you, you take them down.

The other piece to this sort of thinking is the desire to be right. The desire to be right is a very strong temptation that we fall into time and again – not just in our individual lives. When one-on-one battle isn't working to win our cause, we draw others into our circle of "rightness" to prove to others just how right we must be. Bigger causes take bigger circles. The Church has certainly not been immune to this urge to be right – the rush of triumphalism – and, on a larger scale has done on lot of damage in the world. It continues to do damage on a smaller scale in communities all across Canada and the world each and every time someone who loudly professes to be Christian also loudly displays distinctly unchristian words and deeds.

We are not told exactly what Jesus says in response to James and John but we do know he kiboshes their way of thinking. Life isn't a contest to see who wins. Move on, Jesus tells his disciples. Jesus does not judge those who reject him and he, in no uncertain terms, tells us that we must do the same. When Jesus reads from the scroll in his hometown synagogue, Luke makes it clear for us that Jesus' focus is on healing and restoration, inclusion, and the building of community. Jesus' ministry is one of continuously extending the invitation to join him in the life of God's kingdom. That ministry is ours to carry on – the ministry of reconciliation as Paul calls it. We are to invite, to love, to include. It is not our role to decide who God rejects and take care of it for him. God will judge when the time comes.

The rest of today's Gospel story narrows in on the details of the life of a disciple, of a minister of reconciliation, that we have chosen. Jesus calls us away from the temptation of finger-pointing to have us examine our own life commitments and the ordering of our priorities so that we are radically free to follow him.

As one would-be follower eagerly declares to Jesus that he will follow him, Jesus warns that, unlike foxes and the birds of the air, he has no where to lay his head. It is a warning that embarking on the journey with Jesus could involve alienation – as we have already seen in the rejection of Jesus and his followers by the first Samaritan village they try to enter. Does this eager would-be follower take the risk? We don't know. But it is a risk we have signed on for. People will question, people may even ridicule our choice to follow Jesus – to be his body in the world. Allow the Holy Spirit to give you the strength and wisdom to be unapologetic in your response. We have chosen to live the perfect life of God's kingdom. We have chosen to reveal this life to others and to invite others to share in it with us.

The next two sayings of Jesus show to us the radical commitment we have been asked to give to our task of revealing God's kingdom. Jesus' seemingly uncaring response to the man who wants to go bury his father may make you do a double-take. However, "Let me bury my father" actually doesn't mean, "My father is dead as we speak and must be buried." It is request to hang around until his father dies so that he can then bury him. It is a putting off of following Jesus. Let the dead bury their own dead is Jesus' way of saying, "There will always be something in this life that keeps you from me – something more appealing and tempting...comfort, property, prestige, whatever." We must make the decision and stick to it. We either follow Jesus or we follow the ways of the world but the ways of the world do not bring eternal life. As Jesus will say a bit later in Luke's Gospel, "You cannot serve

both God and money.” God’s ways and the world’s ways are opposed and we must choose.

The final saying outlines the danger when we do not choose. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God," Jesus tells another would-be follower. We may not all have experience with plows – especially ones pulled with oxen as in Jesus’ time. But, as with a plow, so too with a car or even a bicycle. If you are looking backwards while trying to go forwards, you very well might end up in ditch. Those who plowed while looking backwards, ruined the work they were trying to do. If we are wishy-washy and keep trying to follow the ways of the world while also trying to live the life of God’s kingdom, we are not going to do a very good job of living the life of God’s kingdom.

Let’s face it, though. We all are a bit wishy-washy. We all live with one foot in the world and one foot in God’s kingdom. Our task is to strive to get both feet, as much as is possible amid the brokenness – our own and the world’s – into God’s kingdom. Just as Jesus resolutely looked toward a future of perfection, a future of glory with God in God’s kingdom, looking beyond the pain and humiliation of betrayal, of his trial in front of taunting and abusive persecutors, of an excruciating death on the cross, we too must look toward the future of perfection and live it in the now as much as we can.

Plowing prepares the ground for the seed, lifting fresh, fertile earth to the surface. Plowing is also a look into the future. When the plowing is done and the seeds are planted, a beautiful abundant crop will grow, waiting to be harvested. Jesus knew God’s vision of the future. “He looked ahead and captured a vision of God’s reign at work in our world. He looked ahead and saw God’s reign overturning sin and the destruction it brings to people. He looked ahead and saw this world becoming open

to God. He looked ahead and saw people being touched by God's reign. And so Jesus acted like a plowman" (Augsberg Sermons 3, p.158-9). He kept his eyes on the furrows before him, on the future he knew was coming, and he turned his face to Jerusalem where this future was to begin.

Today, Jesus invites us to catch his vision, to look with him into God's future, to see the world with eyes as God sees it – in its coming perfection – and to plow the furrows to get to that future. We are to see God's reign at work in our world, to see what this world will look like when sin is gone and lives are restored and to live toward that.

"Presence" a short poem by Anthony de Mello (p.12 of *One Minute Wisdom*)

"Where shall I look for Enlightenment?"

"Here."

"When will it happen?"

"It is happening right now."

"Then why don't I experience it?"

"Because you do not look."

"What should I look for?"

"Nothing. Just look."

"At what?"

"Anything your eyes alight upon."

"Must I look in a special kind of way?"

"No. The ordinary way will do."

"But don't I always look the ordinary way?"

"No."

"Whyever not?"

"Because to look you must be here. You're mostly somewhere else."

Let us be here, in God's kingdom. Let us be fully and truly in the presence of Jesus Christ and, with him, resolutely set our face to God's kingdom.