

June 30, 2019 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21, Psalm 16
Galatians 5:1, 13-25, Luke 9:51-62

[References to the Star Tribune on 6-29-19 and 6-30-19. Amy Oden Working Preacher commentary on Luke 9:51-62 for this date; sermon title echoes Oden's words. Karoline Lewis on Working Preacher posted on 6-24-19 entitled But First.]

Following Fully, Freely

Grace, abounding grace, and peace, and freedom, to you, Christ's beloved. Amen.

Our Gospel reading this morning is the beginning of a long section that we call Jesus' travel narrative.

He has set his face on Jerusalem, steeled his face, it is sometimes translated.

Luke's Gospel has made a turn: Jerusalem and the cross come into view. Jesus can see it.

He can see it even when the disciples are still trying to understand. Jesus can see it.

The urgency, the intensity that we might feel in today's gospel,

really, the tension,

is the gap between Jesus' clarity that he's headed to Jerusalem to the cross,

AND the disciples' persistent, bumble-ly attempts to follow their teacher.

This week, I'm thinking about our context, the swirl all around us,

and how Jesus' challenging words guide us in *our* journey, in *our* travel.

I've got yesterday's newspaper here, this is part of our context:

There's a front page story about Dreamers, really about the desperate need to fix immigration.

We know the tremendous, daily, hourly fear that our friends and neighbors and families are facing.

Some of you will be at the March this afternoon.

There's the story of First Covenant Church, just across the river, by the stadium, and their pastor, Dan

Collison, and how their Evangelical Covenant Church denomination voted to remove them

because of First Covenant's welcome of LGBTQ folks and their position on same sex marriage.

In the article, Pastor Collison said, I'm not surprised. I'm saddened.

There are interestingly placed, side by side articles: France hits record 115 degrees.

And, Major Indian city is running out of water.

In today's paper the headline reads: US dissents as 19 others affirm vow to Paris climate agreement.

There's the continued rising tension with Iran, really tension with much of the world.

We could add more to this context: The holiday week before us, for many: time with family and friends.

The joys we hold this morning.... You know them. Close your eyes, recall them.

And the worries and fears... You know these too.

That's a lot.... That's our context, and to greater and lesser degrees, that's in our ears and on our hearts, as we hear today's gospel and the other readings.

So, three themes, and some practice:

First, reactivity. In the Gospel, there's that strange little exchange with John and James.

A village has declined to welcome Jesus, and in response the disciples wonder, eagerly, it seems,

“Jesus, Jesus, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”

That's what I mean by reactivity—should we use our power and rain fire on them?!

Jesus is quick and clear to rebuke them, and then, it says, so simply: they went on to another village.

I shake my head at James and John and the thought of raining fire,

but when I stop, and pause, and think about our context,

and our high emotions and the general state of anxiety all around us,

and the reactive culture of much of our current politics, I can understand their question...

Amy Oden, professor of early church history AND spirituality—what a combination—writes,

“Our Christian history demonstrates that triumphalism is our besetting sin.

It is a subtle and short step from rejoicing in the good news of Jesus Christ

to attacking those who will not share in it.

Our history shows that when we have the power to harm others we consider outside our circle of triumph,

we are likely to use it.” She concludes, “And Jesus will have none of it.”

I am so grateful that our savior keeps them moving.

Jesus has his face steeled on Jerusalem, he's got his eyes on the cross, so it's no surprise he's not

stressed out by an inhospitable village, he won't play into reactivity.

So here's the practice... when our rightness swells up and other's wrongness seems so obvious,

Breathe, and pay attention to that very deep impulse to reactivity.

That's not what Jesus would do.

Instead of focusing on them, on that situation or person, on that impulse to attack, look inside yourself.

As Amy Oden would ask,

“To what am I attached today that keeps me from following Jesus fully and freely?”

And that gets us to a second theme... Let's call this second theme, But first...

I'll follow you, freely and fully, *but first* I want to bury my father.

Or, I'll follow you, Jesus, but first I need to say goodbye.

I confess: I can be a ruthless list maker and multi-tasker.

I love to do just one more thing, cross one more task off my list.

What Jesus asks is hard, it seems only natural to resist, at least a little.

When I'm headed to do the right thing, moving toward the ones that need my undivided attention,

I'll catch myself..."But first"...

But first... I need to attend to such and such.

But first... let me get one more thing done.

But first...

Can you relate? I pray that you can't, that you've got this discipleship-thing all figured out.,

But I know, when we're honest, we're pulled in many directions.

Karoline Lewis writes, "It is no accident that 'but first' comes up just as Jerusalem is in view.

We need to know what's at stake and we seem to need reminders of it frequently.

Complicity is all too often attractive," she says. "Complacency is all too often the easier way."

What are your "But firsts..."?

What distracts you from following? From trusting fully or wholly?

What gets in your way of trusting that God needs you and your love and your wisdom and your energy?

That line from today's Psalm is poignant: "I have set the Lord always before me, because God is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken."

This morning, after worship, in the lounge, we have an opportunity to write letters to our legislators.

Some will use their smart phone, some have brought their laptop or tablet, some will go old school with pen and paper.

This is part of Bread for the World's 2019 Offering of Letters.

With thousands of other people of faith, we'll ask our elected leaders to support legislation that

accelerates our support for those who are hungry around the world, especially women who are pregnant and young children.

Did you know that almost half of all child deaths worldwide are linked to malnutrition?

We give our financial offerings, and this is just as powerful and tangible, it's an offering of letters.

Finally, I want to spend just a moment on that reading from Galatians.

Paul begins, "For freedom Christ has set us free."

It doesn't say Christ has set me free, but rather Christ has set US free.

Your freedom and my freedom, they are bound up together.

That's part of following and trusting.

Martin Luther wrote how we are free in regards to God, Amen, but we are bound to those in need.

We started today with context, there is a lot of need, in us, all around us, we are bound together.

“The fruit of the Spirit,” Paul continues, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control....If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.”

Which of those fruits of the Spirit do you struggle with the most?

One of my colleagues tells of praying for patience daily for months, maybe a year or more...and slowly, retrospectively, realizing that he'd grown more patient. The Spirit is at work.

Let me read them again and I invite you to hold on to one of them that doesn't come so easily.

And then, and this is a challenge, pray for it, daily.

“The fruit of the Spirit, is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.”

Dear friends in Christ, I know this is all hard, it's hard for me too.

It would be easier to just high-tail it the other way!

But in this time, in this context,

in the joy and the struggle,

in the deep hunger and hurt, God is calling us.

God is calling us to be faithful,

not successful, not perfect, not even correct, but faithful, faithful in the journey.

We'll trip, we'll fall, we'll need to circle back,

and that's okay, there is grace, abounding grace. Amen.