

SERMON, Sunday, 30 June

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We don't usually give Jesus much room for a wide range of emotions in his ways of speaking to us. Oh, we do grant him the flash of anger when he sees the poor being exploited at the Temple as they pay for turtle doves they can ill afford to be sacrificed. Or when he calls the religious leaders hypocrites and blind guides we are certainly with him in that part of us who cannot ourselves tolerate injustice. We recognize Jesus's compassionate and tender voice when he visits the home of Martha and Mary for one of the many meals he shared with them, most especially after the death of their brother Lazarus. We hear the prophetic voice that commands the storm to obey him or for the sick to be healed or for Lazarus to come forth from the tomb. We know the voice that very firmly, but lovingly, chides Peter when the apostle says that God forbid that any harm should come to their Lord when he speaks of his upcoming torture and death.

But what about the Jesus who takes some delight in foiling the logic of those constant attempts to trip him up -- asking whether or not it is permissible or even necessary to follow the letter of the law about work on the Sabbath, or paying taxes, or a host of other scenarios? His parables are extraordinarily clever and witty ways of avoiding flat "yes" and "no" answers—and, always, of involving the hearer in a consideration of how the particular rule fits into one of the two great commandments: to love God and to love one's neighbor.

I've seen many representations in art of the laughing Jesus, but don't remember hearing many readings of the Gospel in which I could actually hear that laughing voice. But we have one such instance in today's Gospel with Jesus deliberately making use of exaggeration or hyperbole to make a point. He could depend on his listeners knowing the story of Elijah and Elisha, so Jesus could build on that familiar story to offer an extraordinary twist.

As an observant and contemplatively prayerful Jew, Jesus knew well the story of the prophets Elijah and Elisha, particularly since a central part of the meeting of the two involves the question of call, vocation, invitation. Jesus's own prayer life must have focused a good deal on this question of vocation as that still, small voice of Abba kept calling to him and inviting him to grow into the fullness of Jesus's own call.

Elijah or Eliyahu was a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel in the 9th century before the birth of Christ. His name literally meant "My God is Yahweh" which gives a perfect image of his prophetic focus in 1 Kings 18 on championing the worship of Yahweh over the Canaanite god, Baal. It is Elijah who arranges with King Ahab and Queen Jezebel for a contest between Yahweh and Baal. Fire is to come down from the heavens to consume the sacrificed animals killed in the worship of the two deities. Fire consumes those animals sacrificed to Yahweh; those creatures sacrificed to Baal remained cold and fire-less.

This is the Elijah who begins to hear in his prayer that God wishes Elisha to join him as attendant and later, for sixty years, Elijah's successor. Elisha, whose name means "My God is salvation," is the son of a wealthy landowner whom Elijah finds plowing his field with his servants and 12 yoke of oxen. He wants to respond to God's call when Elijah throws his mantle over him, but says that the farmer has one prior commitment first. He must greet and say farewell to his parents. Elijah tells him to do just that. But Elisha fulfills one additional responsibility. He feeds his servants, slaughtering the twelve yoke of oxen, using his equipment for fuel in order to cook and prepare the meal, and feed those for whom he bears some financial and other responsibility. It is then that he begins eight years of following Elijah as his attendant and apprentice.

In today's Gospel, Jesus takes us back to that same story, but seems to offer preposterous terms for following him that would violate the all-important expectations of filial duty to parents. To the one who says specifically that he will follow Jesus after he buries his father and prays kaddish for his soul, Jesus seems to offer the callous suggestion that the dead should bury the dead. Another says that he will follow Jesus after he says farewell to his family at home. To him Jesus says that "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God." There have been long centuries when Jesus was taken at his word

quite literally even within those traditions that do not treat the Scriptures as inerrant teachings to be taken literally. In the history of religious life within Catholicism, for example, children left their homes and, depending on the congregation they joined, never returned, in some cases, before the Second Vatican Council of the mid-1960s, even for the funerals of parents. One dear friend in her 50s and the only child of a mother who was herself a widow and an orphan drew the ire of some members of her community because she visited her mother at a nearby nursing home every day. Sue was told that her vocation was her primary commitment and responsibility and that the daily visits were distractions from her life of prayer. Sue maintained that the care of a woman with dementia who had no other family was a primary familial responsibility to which she was accountable to God. She did not remain in community long after her mother died, in part, because of the tension she felt because of her own sense of primacy. One of the footnotes to the Catholic edition of the **New American Bible** reads as follows in relation to this passage: “Even family ties and filial obligations, such as burying one’s parents, cannot distract one no matter how briefly from proclaiming the kingdom of God.” It continues: “Let the spiritually dead (i.e. those who do not follow Jesus) bury their physically dead.” Where the story appears again in Matthew 8, yet another footnote continues along the same line: “The demand of Jesus [that the dead bury their dead] overrides what both the Jewish and the Hellenistic [Greek] world regarded as a filial obligation of the highest importance.”

One of our dear friends, a Vietnamese priest by the name of Phoung Pfam, was the eldest male in his family and, while his parents lived near his plush suburban rectory in Kentwood, he indicated to his Bishop that the family felt isolated from their Vietnamese community in Texas. They wanted to go home, to speak their own language, eat their own foods, and be part of a network of those like themselves who had been able to immigrate to the United States at the end of the Vietnam conflict. The Bishop insisted that Phoung’s primary responsibility was to the Diocese of Grand Rapids even though the young priest tried to explain the cultural expectations of the elder son to his parents. The Bishop threatened that, if Phoung pursued a leave of absence, he would be unincardinated in the Diocese and unable to function as a priest there. Phoung took his parents back to Texas and helped them relocate there – and the Bishop was faithful to his threat. One variable was that Fr. Pfam was one of the most popular priests in the Diocese and he had been entrusted the care of one of the wealthiest

parishes. But Fr. Pham still felt the burning call of priesthood and when he returned home, signed on with an international aid agency that took him to a different diocese in a different part of the country each weekend to preach about the needs of the poor and underserved populations. He could fly off to function as a priest, but not within his own diocese from his Lakeview home. We asked him to celebrate Eucharist privately with us at Emmaus, but he was concerned about enveloping the monastery in repercussions.

I want to suggest that this interpretation that, following Jesus makes subordinate every other kind of filial or other accountability, is an act of mis-reading, of not knowing when Jesus is exaggerating to make an important point. Even when Jesus responds to the news that his family are in town, concerned and looking for him, for himself, there is no disrespect intended in asking: but who are my mother and brothers? The one who does the will of my Father are my mother and brothers.” The radical extension of notions of family beyond mere bloodlines, which will be at the heart of Christian community, does not dismiss or displace filial love and respect. From Deuteronomy to Proverbs to the cure of Peter’s mother-in law, we are to honor our fathers and mothers. I think that what Jesus was saying was that those who do the will of my Father are ALSO mother and sister and brother to me. One need not cancel out the other. There was certainly no disrespect intended for the woman from whom Jesus learned the most about the intimacy we have with Abba.

So we return to what Jesus says about commitments in this Gospel and ask ourselves how are we to read his words? One contemporary theologian suggests that it is a way of underscoring that life with Jesus is a pilgrim’s journey of an entire lifetime. He very provocatively adds that we need to decide whether our primary commitment to the Lord is to *adore* him in a way that is static and inflexible OR to *follow* him as a disciple, imitating his ways of interacting with Samaritans and women, Roman Centurions and their servants, critics who keep trying to enmesh him in questioning the literal-ness of the law, wealthy members of the religious leadership, lepers, and so forth.

It would seem that it is the *following* of Jesus that admits of no interruptions if it is a model for a way of living, a way of being. Whatever one’s engagements or obligations, his is the example, the road-map of how to

live in the midst of the Kingdom. There is only a false sense of a competition between radical discipleship and compassionate care. That was so apparent in the first five centuries of Christianity when the followers of Jesus were not yet known as Christians. As Alden Bass says: “The history of committed Christian community is a story of roads. The first followers of Jesus called themselves “the Way,” a name that echoes Jewish *halakha*, the “way of life” enshrined in the Torah, as well as the disciples’ belief that Jesus was “the way” to God the Father.”

When Jesus ascends a high mountain with the three disciples, Peter, James, and John in the experience of the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appear to them as Jesus converses with the two prophets. “Lord,” says Peter, “it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” But Jesus does not ask Peter to freeze the moment or the experience; he does not ask anyone to try to institutionalize the event, but to come down, with him, from the mountain and to continue the pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

The itinerary is the continuous route travelled by the one we imitate and after whom we are to model ourselves as closely as possible. “Foxes have dens and the birds of the sky have nests”, but that is not the case of the Son of Man or his disciples. The prophet Elisha, in his old age, died in his own bed. Jesus did not. Both our itinerary and our destination are the same place: it is on the way, on the road, through life and death to resurrection.