



Three people seek to follow Jesus in today's reading. One is reminded that while foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Following Jesus may mean leaving your comfort zone, your established home.

Jesus said to the second person: "Follow me." But that person asked to first go and bury his father. Jesus responds with the puzzling "let the dead bury the dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Apparently that person was not to literally follow Jesus on his journey towards Jerusalem but rather to stay where he was and proclaim the good news from his home. No picking up and moving – but rather using opportunities to preach the good news in an existing place.

And the third person is cautioned that he who looks back while plowing is not fit for the kingdom of God. Looking back results in going off track – the furrow is no longer straight but curves away. Being fit for the kingdom of God means keeping your eye straight ahead and not being distracted which is all too easy with cell phones, tablets, and all the amazing technology of our daily life. Not that these are bad but rather that we need to be intentional about appropriate boundaries and consider our dependence upon things of the world rather than life focused on God.

David Grant Smith is a process-relational theologian. Process-relational theology contends that we are working with God to create God's realm on earth. What we do affects God. Despite how many times we stray from God, however, God continually calls us back towards love and reminds us that God calls us to love God with all our mind, our heart and our soul. And then to love neighbor as self. He says:

"Our past experiences, though always present with us, need not be deterministic in shaping our futures. What shapes our future is the way that we respond to God's lures toward creativity in the here-and-now. .. We have all been rejected at some point, simply because our face was set toward "fill-in-the-blank." Simply because we have been living our lives with a particular trajectory, there are those who oppose us and wish to extend no hospitality to us because of it.

There can be at least two ways to consider what this might mean. On the one hand, we could perceive ourselves as being on a course which we think to be in line with God's lure and guidance, and those who reject us have other priorities.

Alternatively, those who may reject our overtures toward entering their lives may have a sense that we are simply not living into God's call" on our lives, "but are self-serving, and their rejection of us may have more to do with how we are being challenged to pursue a period of discernment and self-examination. Either way, the issue to be considered here is that of discernment; as faithful people, we need to constantly be mindful of, and open to, God's call, and be willing to do the discernment work needed to be assured we are following it to the best of our abilities."¹

The Barnabas Project is, among other things, a call to raise up transformational leaders within a parish understanding that the church of our parents is not the church of the 21st century. It is not suggesting that we throw the baby out with the bathwater, but rather than we be willing to look beyond our comfort zone and consider where love may be calling us today. The book Beyond the Baptismal Covenant includes a plea to discern where your gifts and talents lie and then to use those gifts and talents for the building up of God's realm on earth.

But even those who do follow Jesus don't always understand what Jesus wants. Look who wants to call down fire because the Samaritans don't welcome Jesus? It's James and John – the ones who argued about which of them would sit at the right hand and which at the left hand of Jesus in heaven. Which of the disciples was the greatest? Earthly pride and ego getting in the way of a mission to all of humanity where the first will be last and the last first.

Returning to the text from Luke for today, what's up with calling down fire to consumer the Samaritans, who weren't friendly to the Jews anyway? Is violence and death God's answer when we go astray? And who is it that seems not to have gotten the message that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves?

Well, Peter, James and John had been with Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration. That was when they saw Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah. And it was Elijah – one of the most important prophets to the Jewish people – who called down fire against the prophets of Baal. Elijah called down fire to show the people that he, Elijah, was the true prophet from God. The temptation to use power to put down those who disagree with us can be overwhelming.

Jesus, however, doesn't need to do this. And Jesus doesn't countenance violence against those who reject the message he brings. Jesus turns and rebukes them – and I imagine is sorrowful at their continuing lack of understanding of the message that Jesus brings. Violence is not the answer. Retaliation is not the answer. Shake off the dust from your feet and turn your face towards Jerusalem. Keep your eye on the ball in current vernacular.

And then! "Let the dead bury the dead." How cruel and unfeeling and disrespectful of family- which was so central to life at that time. In ways that we cannot truly comprehend today because our society is so different, family was central- you did not have identity as an individual, only identity as a member of a family, a tribe, a city or community. The connection to and importance of family is still evident particularly in the south, where one of the first questions upon meeting someone is "who is your family" – are you kin to fill-in-the-blank. The questions can seem downright intrusive to one not raised in a part of the country that has this same fascination with

¹ <http://processandfaith.org/resources/lectionary-commentary/yearc/2013-06-30/proper-8> (June 29, 2013)

relationships, but it is one way of reminding all of us that we are, deep down, connected with each other.

Jesus doesn't ask us to not love family, to not care when our father dies – but he does ask us to prioritize. To make the first thing in our life the love of God. What is the greatest commandment? To love God with all your heart, your mind and your soul. Doing so enables everything else in life to fall into its proper place. Yes, at first glance Jesus is engaging in a bit of “tough love.” It's hard to hear that the dead should bury the dead – and that we shouldn't look back lest we get distracted and fall away from the true goal of following God. But sometimes we need to have those tough words said to us – we get complacent. We come to depend upon our own initiative more than we listen for God.

Jesus tells the disciples, he tells the three people who wanted to follow him, and he tells us that putting conditions on our commitment to God is not acceptable. Let the dead bury the dead. Don't turn aside when plowing the field. Live in the present and not the past. We are where we are and to a large extent, if we want to move forward, we need to let the past be the past. Remember Lot's wife who turned back even though she had been told not to. She was turned into a pillar of salt. She lost her life by focusing on the past and not the journey forward.

And to the one who sought to leave home – perhaps wanting to be a star. Perhaps wanting to feed his ego by becoming associated with the ministry on the road. No, for you: Go and proclaim the good news in your home town. Look around you: the gospel field is fertile right where you are. Maybe you won't achieve the prominence you might if you went away, but God has work for you to do right where you are.

Jesus knew the circumstances of each of the three who asked to follow him. His answers spoke to the things that were distracting them from setting their face on God. His answers spoke to the things around which their hands were clutched. Jesus' call to us is to open our hands. To let go of what distracts us from following him. To trust God to fill our hands with what we need even when we don't know what that might be.

It's tough to depend upon God when the world around us, and American culture in particular, highlights the importance of being independent, self-sufficient and generally all-around competent. It's hard to admit that perhaps we don't have all the answers. We can't solve the problems or fill the needs of the ones we love. It's isn't just about us, in common parlance.

It's about God. It's about our love for God and our willingness to make God our number one priority. It's about being willing to set our faces towards Jerusalem. To do that means we need to trust – we need to believe – that God has our best interests at heart. That even when we do not understand, we can still trust in a God that loves us – a God that loved us first and patiently waits for us to respond: Here I am, Lord, send me.