

“I Will Follow...Maybe”
First United Presbyterian Church
II Kings 2:1-2,6-14; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62

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Our passage in Galatians is near the end of Paul’s contentious letter to the church in Galatia. Paul believed they were living in the “in between age of the Spirit, in which Christians have the opportunity to exhibit the attributes of Christ” before he returned. [Feasting on the Word Year C, volume 3, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 185] Paul considers this opportunity to be a responsibility, not an option, and uses two lists to contrast two very different ways of living in this “in between age.”

The first choice is to practice works of the flesh, a way of living that is self-indulgent, self-centered, with some such practices having the potential to actually hurt others. Paul rejects this option, paraphrasing the words of Rabbi Hillel, who wrote, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

By contrast, the fruit of the spirit offers an alternative way of living for the faith community. Fruit of the spirit is a term that is both singular and wholistic. The fruit of the Spirit is not known in isolation – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are recognized as fruit of a life lived in relationship and community.

Let us hear Galatians 5:16-25.

Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Works of the flesh or fruit of the Spirit. A choice. The theme of choice continues in our Gospel reading. We summarized the last part in our confession time, but this passage begins with Luke’s noting it is a turning point in Jesus’ ministry. He has been teaching and healing, but then we hear, Jesus has made a decision. In Luke’s words, Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, and since we know the story’s ending, we know what is waiting for Jesus there – trial, conviction, crucifixion.

Yet, the journey is not an express route. It is often quipped that Luke would have failed geography because in the ten chapters it will take Jesus to reach Jerusalem, there is no hint of either logical timetable or direct route for this journey. Luke is concerned with staying on message, not staying on track or on time. So, we will find Jesus and his disciples wandering into Gentile Samaria, where relationships with Jews were anything but cordial. Who will go with them? Who will follow?

We will hear of three people. Two tell Jesus they want to follow. Jesus will ask a third to follow. This is where we find the lesson on choices, and excuses, and knowing what we have ahead of us if we choose to follow the one whose face is set toward Jerusalem.

Our II Kings 2 story of Elijah began with the words, *“Now when God was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal.”* The parallel with the first line of our Gospel passage is not to be lost. Luke 9:51-62:

⁵¹*When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.* ⁵²*And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;* ⁵³*but they did not receive Jesus, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.* ⁵⁴*When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”* ⁵⁵*But he turned and rebuked them.* ⁵⁶*Then they went on to another village.*

⁵⁷*As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”* ⁵⁸*And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of God has nowhere to lay his head.”* ⁵⁹*To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.”* ⁶⁰*But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”* ⁶¹*Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”* ⁶²*Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

I looked over Jordan and what did I see? Coming for to carry me home? A band of angels coming after me. Swing low, sweet chariot – swing low, and sweep up, up, up and away the prophet Elijah, who seems not to have died, but was simply taken up into the heavens. What a way to go! To this day, a place for Elijah is still set at a Jewish seder. It is no wonder Jesus was thought to be the return of Elijah in the Gospels.

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is one of the “hidden” or imbedded songs of the Underground Railroad, revealed in Frederick Douglass’ autobiography and elsewhere. Along with such songs as Steal Away, imbedded songs had both a biblical theme and coded message. The promise of heaven was the promise of freedom, liberation from slavery. So, as one looked across the Jordan, often the Ohio River, from the land of slavery, the swinging low chariot was awaited. It was accompanied by the angels, the railroad conductors such as Harriet Tubman. The home to which one was to be carried was the land of heavenly of freedom. When a chariot arrived, one needed to be at the river, and ready to go.

It is such a sense of readiness we hear in Jesus' replies to the three would-be followers: No going back to make funeral arrangements for a loved one, no returning to say one's last goodbyes. When the chariot arrives, one hops aboard. On that journey, there will not be great accommodations. One may have to sleep in the back of a wagon full of hay, covered with a tarp, and perhaps shared with animals – foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of God has no where to lay his head ... and neither will those who choose to follow him. When the chariot arrives, it is time to go. When Jesus bids follow, it is time to go. When a pastor search committee presents a new pastor, it is time ... for the interim to go. But not yet.

In some ways, an interim pastor lives more than others with the question of what is next, and while seeking God's guidance, there are times anxiety and the need to pay the bills tempts one to consider something that might not seem right. During my 38 years of ministry, 23 as an interim pastor, I have interviewed for positions, and then been relieved when the call came saying they had been offered to someone else. While I could have fulfilled the responsibilities, I had recognized in my heart and my gut, I was forcing myself into believing I was being called to that work, sometimes before and sometimes during the interview. This was confirmed in the relief I felt when the call came, saying, "Not you."

I believe one of the gifts we are offered in life, one of the freeing things we can experience, is to have a deep, inner assurance something is right. Heart and gut together confirm for us: the time has come, the time is now, this is what I am meant to do. In one interim pastorate, I struggled for the first two months, wondering fairly often, "Into what have I gotten myself?", or if I wanted to point a finger of blame, I asked, "God, into what have you gotten me?" Then, it became clear. I sensed why I was there, and while it was a hard and exhausting interim, the inner confirmation of purpose and direction provided the strength to follow through and journey on.

This sense of purpose and direction is what we have when Luke writes that Jesus' face was turned to Jerusalem. This was his mission and while he will not take the shortest route to the city of his death, everything from this point on will be viewed with an urgency that has no room for excuses.

So, when one says to Jesus he wants to follow him, Jesus tells of what will be given up in terms of creature security, not even having a place to rest one's head in comfort at night. When Jesus calls another to follow, but it is noted there is a Torah obligation to tend to one's father's funeral arrangements, Jesus does not condemn, but simply says, it is time to go now. The chariot's at the river. You either go with me or you go back.

A similar message is offered the one who wants to go say goodbye to his family, and once again the parallel with the Elijah story appears. Elijah had allowed Elisha to say goodbye earlier in the books of Kings.

Several weeks ago we read of Elijah calling down fire and consuming the burnt offering, and then destroying the prophets of Baal, but when James and John want to do the same to the Samaritans who will not receive Jesus, Jesus rebukes them. In essence he tells them, "Yes, I know what Elijah did, but I am not Elijah, and if you are following me, revenge and violence are not a part of this journey."

For Jesus, “I will follow...maybe,” is not an option. Jesus has a focus, a single-mindedness of purpose, which will guide his teaching all along the way to Jerusalem. Jesus’ all-encompassing love will extend to even those who do not receive him. That love will be seeded in unexpected places and people, so in the next chapter Jesus will tell a parable of a Samaritan whom we have come to call good.

I find Paul’s encouragement for the Galatians to live in a way that bears the fruit of the Spirit concurs with Jesus’ message. While there was a sense of urgency for Paul in being ready for Jesus to come again, he warned against self-indulgence in the final days, and against having such a fervent conviction of one’s rightness that one imposed it on others. Rather, the freedom in being able to love and serve in the way of Jesus, and bear the fruit of the Spirit, are cherished gifts of God.

Preparing to follow does not just mean a readiness for the chariot to take us up, up and away into the heavens, but a readiness to say, “Yes, I will follow,” here and now, when the call comes, when in the depth of our heart and the pit of our gut, we sense a rightness about the next step in our life.

Yet, the reality is, even if we are ready to follow, even if we are waiting by the river for the chariot, prepared to go, there are times we must wait, and be patient. I think particularly of those who have finished their schooling and are trained for a career, but there are no jobs; or later in life, when one has been in a job but the company is downsized. Ready to go, but no chariot comes by.

As I was writing this sermon, I recalled an interview I heard on the PBS Newshour about the dearth of available employment for professional musicians. [as read online at: http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business-jan-june13-artists_06-27/] Diane Wittry, conductor of the Allentown Symphony noted that for every opening, in even a small orchestra, there could be 300 well qualified applicants for that single position. Paul Solman, who tries to make economics understandable for viewers responded: “So [musicians have to teach to earn a living and so, they are] creating more and more musicians who, in order to earn a living, have to teach, creating more and more really great students, who then have to do the same thing. It’s like a Ponzi scheme.”

Diane Wittry replied: “... you’re thinking of it like an economist. But we, as musicians, we don’t go into music for the money. We go into music because it’s part of our soul. It’s part of who we are. [We want to share music with the world.] It’s what we have to do.” Parker Palmer express the same when he uses the double-negative phrase, “something I could not not do.”

“It’s what we have to do.” Even in the waiting times of life, the tough, uncertain times, “It’s what we have to do.” And so to paraphrase Diane Wittry, “We don’t follow Jesus for the money. We follow the ways of Jesus because it is part of our soul. Bearing the fruit of the spirit is part of who we are. It is what we have to do.” And there is no maybe about it.