

Sermon for Proper 8C

Sunday, June 30, 2019

“Set your face toward Jerusalem, and don’t look back!”

Text: Luke 9:51-62

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Every 3 years when I hear today’s Gospel I remember this very day six years ago, when Fr. Henry introduced me to you as the new Rector. In his sermon, he told me to set my face toward Jerusalem as I led the people of All Saints. He was referring to Woodhaven as our Jerusalem, to keep our eye on the prize of new, vibrant ministry in this place and not to look back. And here we are, making a difference in Woodhaven, and we’re not looking back! And today, I would like to focus on the final verse of today’s Gospel in which Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” This is shocking advice by Jesus Christ regarding the seriousness of following him as one of his disciples, and I think it is a fitting call for us today as we celebrate and honor the Women of All Saints.

This passage of scripture and vignette of Jesus in his ministry is somewhat difficult to get our minds around. It’s very short, but it says many things about discipleship, about what it means to follow Jesus, and the sacrifices that we as disciples are going to face. Right from the beginning, Jesus and his disciples are confronted with rejection by the people of a Samaritan village. You may recall, Samaritans and Jews did not get along. In fact, they weren’t even supposed to talk to each other or associate with each other. And not only that, Samaritans considered the town of Shechem to be their capital where their temple was located, not Jerusalem. So Jesus and his followers were not making a good impression when he made it clear that he was headed to Jerusalem. Then we have that exchange between two people who intend to follow Jesus. One says, “I’ll follow you, Jesus, but first let me go bury my father.” And Jesus quickly tells him to let the dead bury their own dead. Harsh words to hear in a culture where not giving a person a proper burial among the one’s ancestors would have been one of the greatest dishonors imaginable. Not only that, Jesus tells another potential disciple not to even say goodbye to his family, just leave them right then and there.

But following Jesus is serious business. Following Jesus requires sacrifice. In our modern-day experience, we really don’t feel the gravity of the idea of following a radical, countercultural preacher. For Jesus and his disciples, following him meant challenging the very fabric of religious and cultural life, not because they were doing anything wrong in theory, but because they were challenging “the way things were,” they were bucking the status quo. The people who heard the written Gospel of St. Luke many decades later faced persecution and risked their very lives when they testified to being Christian, so this passage had very profound meaning for them and just how seriously they were to take their faith. Jesus made it clear that following him must be done fully and without delay.

Our challenges are different, but not so much. We are challenged to be countercultural in our own time. When voices in our culture tell us that it is ok to discriminate against someone because of their race, ethnic or national origin, religion, economic status, sexuality, gender identity, eye color, choice of clothing, whatever, we Christians are to be countercultural and say, “No, this isn’t right.” We are called to love and respect everybody, regardless of whatever ways they identify themselves and regardless of the choices they make, even when we disagree with those choices. Jesus has called us to put our hand on the plow and keep our eyes focused on tilling the ground, showing the world what it means to love and respect one another unconditionally. And we are to do this without any expectation of praise, honor, acceptance, a thank you, or even a pat on the back. We are just supposed to do it.

Today we celebrate women, the Women of All Saints, and all of the women in whose legacy our lives at present rest. We honor the matriarchs of the Old Testament, like Eve, Sarah, Deborah, Rahab, Rachel, Ruth, Esther, Judith, Susanna, among others. We honor the great women of the New Testament, such as the Blessed Virgin Mary, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla, and Phoebe. We honor the mystics and religious women like St. Hildegard of Bingen and St. Hilda of Whitby whose faith journeys and profound advice inspire our own journeys through life. We honor the women who took seriously the call to be countercultural, challenged the way things were in this country, and fought against slavery, fought for women’s rights, and fight today for racial equality, gender identity equality, sexuality equality, and economic equality. And we honor you: the Women of All Saints who work hard day after day making this place live out its mission to proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord through our worship, our music, our hospitality, our love for each other, and for our outreach into the community. The work of St. Hilda’s Guild has made a difference to so many lives over its 27-year history. But the work is not done. In fact there is much more work to do. We have a number of young ladies, both youth and adults, in our church who need to become a part of the Guild to carry on the legacy into the future, for the next fifty years. There are people in this neighborhood of Woodhaven who need food, clothing, shelter, money, a cup of coffee, activities to keep them busy, or even just someone to talk to. There are so many ways that the Women of All Saints have been doing all of these things and will continue to inspire, support, and love God’s people. So set your face toward Jerusalem. Keep your eye on the prize. Don’t worry if the world rejects you—don’t worry if jealous folks from All Saints reject you! Keep on keeping on. Do the work that God has called you to do and be the disciples that Jesus has called you to be. Do it now and without delay. Amen.

#### Resource

Mikeal C. Parsons, “Commentary on Luke 9:51-62,”

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2911](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2911)