

June 27, 2010
Lectionary 13c
Luke 9:51-62
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

DON'T LOOK BACK

I don't know what's wrong with looking back. Jesus says that if you put your hand to the plow and look back, you're not fit for the kingdom of God. Maybe we would translate: No one who keeps their eyes on the rear-view mirror can be on a spiritual path.

Yet, looking back is important. We need to know where we've come from. We need to know our ancestors. We need to know our roots. We need to know our stories. We need to know how we've become who we are.

Looking back helps us to make sense of the past. At Holy Trinity we value our Lutheran heritage, our liturgical tradition, and our twenty years of being a Reconciling in Christ congregation, something we celebrate on this Pride Sunday.

But in today's gospel, Jesus is on a mission. His face is set toward Jerusalem, as Luke tells it. He knows where he is going. He doesn't seem to be on the path of self-fulfillment but on a journey that involves reaching out to the sick and marginalized, but will also lead to suffering and death.

Yet despite the destination of his journey, there's something about Jesus that draws people to him. Is it his piercing eyes? His wise words? His compassionate touch? His strong determination? His peaceful demeanor? No surprise that folks are saying: "I will follow you wherever you go, Jesus. I'm right behind you. Show me the way--and I'm there."

The thing is: Jesus isn't on a journey as we know it. Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. And come to think of it: who follows a homeless person, anyway? Jesus isn't going "somewhere." Maybe that's to say that the spiritual journey is about not getting too comfortable and secure. It's about letting go, taking risks. Always being on the move. Always learning more. Always moving forward.

And: to go forward means leaving something behind. And that's downright scary.

For one thing, we get stuck. Stuck in ruts. Stuck in doing things like we always have. Our brains get stuck in the same patterns, the same problems, the same insecurities. Whether as individuals, as groups, as communities, as families, as nations, as churches. We get stuck. Looking in the rear-view mirror so much that we can't see the road ahead.

And we can get stuck in our excuses. "I'll follow you, Lord, but first let me bury my father. I'll follow you Lord, but let me first say farewell to my loved ones at home." Good and honorable things. There are commandments about such things. These are family values in the best sense of the word.

Then why does Jesus seem to pan these excuses? Why does Jesus make that flippant comment: let the dead bury their dead? Or: those who look back are not fit for the kingdom of God?

There seems to be an urgency to the message. Is it because life is short? The end of the world is near? Is it because it's easy for us to make excuses and lose what is most important in our lives? Is it because if we put God first, it means there are things we need to let go of? Or is it because to get our attention, Jesus needs to shock us into action, into commitment, into changing our ways?

Maybe it's like the pithy phrase written on our side rear-view mirrors: *Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.* Maybe we're closer to those eager disciples than we want to admit. Yes, Lord, we'll follow you anywhere. But first let me check my e-mail. First let me finish the stuff on my "to do" list. First, let me get my life in order.

It takes courage to not look back, to move forward, to follow.

While on vacation in Colorado I watched the movie *Precious* on DVD. You've probably heard it is a difficult movie to watch and deals with some very painful and complex situations. Precious is a sixteen year-old African American girl in Harlem. Throughout her life she has been sexually abused by her father, and verbally and physically abused by her lazy and angry mother. You can't imagine a more hopeless situation. Everyone seems to be stuck. No wonder Precious lives in a fantasy world, imagining herself as a model, a singing star, a celebrity.

Yet the movie is also very hopeful. Because of exceptional math scores, Precious is assigned to an alternative school, "Each One, Teach One." With education and a passionate, determined mentor, Precious moves beyond her terrible past. At the end of the movie she is able to walk away from her manipulative mother. Not that her painful past won't always be a part of her. But Precious is able to walk on, not looking back, trusting that she has the inner resources to face the challenges ahead.

It reminds me of the song by Fleetwood Mac:

*Don't stop, thinking about tomorrow,
Don't stop, it'll soon be here,
It'll be, better than before,
Yesterday's gone, yesterday's gone.
Don't you look back,
Don't you look back.*

This morning we do look back. Grateful for the freedom we have in Christ. Thankful for the fruits of the Spirit that blossom forth in this community of faith. Yet we also savor the present moment, breathing in God's mercy and grace.

And nourished at this table, we can't wait to get on with our lives. Eager to follow. Ready to follow.