

June 26, 2022

1 Kings 19:16b, 19-21

Psalms 16

Galatians 5:1, 13-18

Luke 9:51-62

“No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the Kingdom of God.” That startling statement of Jesus that concludes today’s Gospel has special meaning for me. My father had me driving tractors and plowing fields early in life. The first tasks were simple – tasks that would not likely get me hurt and that I would not likely mess up. As I grew, the assignments became more demanding and more complex until, finally, he let me cultivate growing crops, a job that required a fair degree of precision and attention. He gave me few instructions before sending me on my way, but one that I remember most vividly was, “Do not look back.” He never explained why, but he made it very clear that I was to stay focused on where the tractor was headed, not on where it had been. I was puzzled. The plow was behind the tractor. Shouldn’t I look back at least occasionally to see what was happening? “No,” he answered, “You will see that when you get to the end of the rows and turn around.” Still somewhat confused, I climbed on the tractor and began cultivating, following his instructions for a while. But in time, curiosity got the best of me, and I looked back – not just once, but several times. I did not realize at first, but I finally understood that each time I looked back, I would turn the tractor’s steering wheel ever so slightly – just enough to plow up four rows of growing plants for about ten feet. At harvest time, my father noticed these “bald” spots in our field, and he asked me about them. I played dumb, but he knew better. To my relief, he did not yell at me. Instead, he just gave me a knowing smile and said, “Maybe it was lightning.” That experience and the lessons I learned from it have stayed with me for more than sixty years, far longer than any amount of yelling he could have done for my not following his instructions.

Jesus did not always explain his teachings either. He often taught in parables, using stories about familiar life circumstances to illustrate the points he wanted to make. But he rarely explained the meaning of his parables. He let his listeners figure them out. That may not be the easiest way to learn, but it probably is the most effective. Good teachers know what Benjamin Franklin said best, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” Today’s Gospel is a good example of Jesus involving his disciples as he taught them. His bold challenges to leave everything behind and not look back got their attention, solidified their commitments, and prepared them to continue his ministry after he was gone. This ninth chapter of Luke marks the completion of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and the beginning of his final journey to Jerusalem. The disciples would soon be tested far beyond their wildest expectations. Jesus knew they had to be ready. The rejection they experienced in the Samaritan village was only a prelude to what was in store for them at the hands of their own Jewish officials and people in Jerusalem. Half-hearted commitments to Jesus were not good enough. Not knowing where he was taking them, they had to drop everything without hesitation, follow him, and not look back.

The faith and commitment that Jesus demands did not come easy for his disciples, and they are certainly not easy for us today. Dropping everything and not looking back run against our human nature, but Jesus is on an entirely different level. We think we need to be anchored with absolutes, with rules, and with affirmation. But Jesus says we just need faith, love, and an unwavering commitment to follow him.

Jesus knew that we are not strong enough to drop everything and follow him on our own, so he promised his disciples that he would strengthen us with an advocate, the Holy Spirit, to remind us of all that he taught and to be with us for all time. In our second reading today,

Saint Paul writes to the Galatians that the Holy Spirit not only strengthens us but also frees us. Within the Christian community in Galatia, there existed a powerful faction that demanded strict adherence to Jewish law. But Paul rejected this legalism, which he considered oppressive. He called it a “yoke of slavery.” He said followers of Christ are free from the law. He called on the people to “live by the Spirit” and not by the law. He cautioned them, however, not to use their freedom as an opportunity to give in to worldly temptations and vices. Rather, it is freedom to serve one another through Christian love. Paul said, “...the whole law is fulfilled in one statement, namely, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” And, he added, “...if you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law.”

Though we today are not bound by first century Jewish law, we too can succumb to unfounded legalism. Laws are written by humans, and we humans have weaknesses, biases, and prejudices which may be reflected in the law. Some laws can be discriminatory and binding, whether intentional or not. Paul’s letter to the Galatians calls us to resist everything that is oppressive and authoritative, whatever the source, and live in communion with the Holy Spirit to safeguard freedom and to sustain love for all life. That is building the Kingdom of God.

Jesus spoke often of the Kingdom, as he did in today’s Gospel. He challenges us to prepare for the Heavenly Kingdom by building God’s Kingdom on earth with love, mercy, and justice. Building God’s Kingdom is about hope for what can be. It is not about nostalgia for what once was. It is neither about satisfaction with what is now nor contempt for what is now. It is about hope for what can be.