

“Determination and Sacrifice”

Luke 9:51-62, Proper 8-C

June 26, 2016

“When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (v. 51).

With these words, our Gospel lesson this morning begins a whole new section in St. Luke’s Gospel that is actually ten-chapters in length. This section runs all the way from Luke 9:51, unto Luke 19:27, where we will find Jesus sitting a donkey that first Palm Sunday about to ride into Jerusalem and finally receive the public praise and adoration that are due him as the long-awaited Promised Messiah.

Bible scholars have long identified these ten chapters as —“**Jesus’ Travel Narrative.**” For in these chapters Jesus speaks repeatedly of his own determination to go ever forward to Jerusalem and of the sacrifice he will make with his very life that is awaiting him on the cross!

Jesus speaks repeatedly of **his firm resolve and of the personal commitment he is willing to make** in terms of his sacrifice there, so that no one should ever jump to the false conclusion that Jesus had somehow just become the unfortunate victim of some type of cruel fate over which he was absolutely powerless!

Jesus who says repeatedly: “I have not come to do my will but the will of him who sent me,” and “the words that I speak to you are not my words, but the Father’s words, who sent me!” is not willing allow anyone or anything to distract him from that goal.

Similarly he **cautions his disciples (and any would-be disciples) against allowing themselves from ever becoming distracted away from the cross either! Why? Because there is no Christianity without the cross!** Perhaps the great hymn writer Isaac Watts said it best in a refrain he had written for one of his great Gospel hymns. He wrote: “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light and the burden of my heart rolled away. It was there by faith I received my sight, and now I am happy all the day!”

Therefore, now very purposefully on our Savior’s way toward Jerusalem, Jesus now instructs some of his disciples to go ahead of him into a Samaritan village where they were to make preparations for his own impending arrival there! These disciples obey Jesus’ command but unfortunately his disciples’ attempt to fulfill this **task is met with an outright rejection by the residents living in that Samaritan village.**

We are not really told why this particular group of Samaritans became so inhospitable towards Jesus! Maybe it’s because our Lord’s face was set to go to Jerusalem and not to go to Mount Gerizim, where the Samaritans had built a second temple precisely for themselves, since the orthodox Jews in Jerusalem for the most part despised them!

When Jesus’ disciples are turned away from that Samaritan village, their natural instincts seem to totally take over their whole personalities. They become like immature children! James and John, the sons of Zebedee, particularly—nicknamed elsewhere as “**The Sons of Thunder**” (Mark 3:17) ask Jesus: “*Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and consume them?*”

In doing so, they were actually taking their **cue from the Prophet Elijah** who had done this centuries before this (**2 Kings 1:10-14**)! But our Lord Jesus will have none of this! For this was never why God sent his only-begotten Son into the world! Heavens no! For on another occasion Jesus explained his mission to his followers very pointedly when he said: “*The Son of Man is come to seek and save the lost*” (Luke 19:10)!

Therefore, in response to their delightful suggestion, Jesus turned back towards them! Facing them again, St. Luke tells us that he rebukes them (Luke 9:55)! Then they travel on to another village!

Jesus was determined to fulfill his mission! And we all know that determination can often be, at times, a powerful force for good at work in our lives.

I titled the message this morning “Determination and Sacrifice,” because just like Jesus and the disciples who were following him back then—we each need to have our own fair share of determination too, if we are to follow him successfully throughout our lives!

We too, Paul reminds us in Romans 12:1-2, need to present ourselves as **LIVING SACRIFICES HOLY AND ACCEPTABLE TO GOD, WHICH PAULS SAYS, IS NOTHING LESS THAT OUR REASONABLE SERVICE.**

One dictionary I came across online defines the word “determination” as a quality that empowers a person to continue to try and do something, even when and especially when the thing you are trying to do is especially challenging and difficult!

The word “determination” can easily bring to mind for us some of those old adages like: “If at first you do not succeed, try and try and try again.” I learned this past week that that old maxim was first used by American school teachers back in the late 18th Century when they were encouraging their students to put a little more determination and sacrifice into doing their homework assignments and to not give up on trying to solve their math problems, and the like, too soon!

Unfortunately, however, Jesus’ threefold response that he gives to three would-be disciples that he meets along the way to Jerusalem—are answers that some people reading the Bible might suggest are just a little too harsh, maybe even somewhat demeaning!

Some people who have read this passage even ask themselves such questions as: “Was Jesus just in a foul mood that day as some people might think? Was Jesus just being cranky that day? Were there even some times when it must have seemed to other people that Jesus certainly woken up on the wrong side of the bed earlier that morning?”

It’s possible that Jesus sometimes got discouraged, or was maybe even somewhat in a foul mood—for all those feelings are part of our emotions and we don’t really have all that much power over all the time! Is it a sin to be in a foul mood? Is it a sin to be cranky? Is it a sin—if your demeanor, at times, gives other people the impression that you woke up on the wrong side of the bed that morning?

It’s probably not a sin! Being angry is not a sin! But being discouraged or in a foul mood or cranky, or giving others the impression that we woke up on the wrong side of the bed that morning---could easily lead us into sin. I like what St. Paul says to the Ephesians 4:26, “*Be angry but do not sin!*”

Here Jesus is traveling on his way with his disciples to Jerusalem, when a would-be disciple approaches Jesus very unexpectedly; like we sometimes still say today: “Out of the blue!” His first words to Jesus are: “*I will follow you (Jesus) wherever you go*” (v. 57)!

But rather than Jesus now simply jumping up and down for joy and doing his happy-dance, to use a modern-day colloquialism—rather than our Lord flashing a big smile in this man’s direction—and then proceeding to hug him, **Jesus’ responds with some very sobering words** that could easily have dampened this would-be disciple’s personal spirit: “*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head*” (Luke 9:58)!

Why would Jesus risk losing a potential follower? Why would Jesus deflate this man’s balloon or seek to let all of the air out of his tires? Why would Jesus seek to dissuade this man from following him by speaking to him **about the kind of insecurity and physical homelessness** that could possibly come to him if he became a part of Jesus itinerant ministry and if he really wanted to become one of Jesus’ disciples?

Jesus was just being honest with this man! Jesus was asking this man to count the cost! Jesus was asking this man if he actually had the kind of determination that is always needed on the part of anyone who seeks to much more than that of being simply a nominal Christian! Our Lord does not want us to be simply “nominal” Christians. In his Sermon on the Mount he reminds us, *“Not all those who say unto me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but they who do the will of my Father in heaven”* (Matthew 7:21)

Jesus knew that being a disciple required a great sense of determination and a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the Gospel! *“To another he said, ‘Follow me,’ but that man replied: “Lord, let me first go and bury his father!”*

I don’t believe, as some have suggested, that this man’s father had died earlier that day and he had to get his deceased father’s body buried before sunset, as was required by a Jewish tradition. Maybe this man was saying, **“I’d love to follow you Jesus, but I have an elderly father at home who needs my care! Once my father has died, then I’ll come and be your disciple!”** And this doesn’t sound all that unusual to us does it? And maybe Jesus knew something that you or I do not know about this man! **Maybe he was from a large family and this man had several brothers and sisters living close-by who would no doubt take care of this would-be disciple’s elderly father!** Maybe this would-be disciple was using conveniently using what he might have perceived to be his greatest responsibility toward his father as a stall-tactic, or maybe even as an excuse, to put off fully committing himself to and surrendering his life to Jesus completely at this time!

“Yet, another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home!’ And Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God!” (Luke 9:62)!”

I have never plowed a field with a mule before, and I am probably pretty sure that most of you haven’t ever tried it either, but I did read some interesting stories on the Internet this past week, indicating that there still are a number of people all throughout the United States, with large tracts of land that do continue to plow up with the help of a faithful mule—before they plant their rather large vegetable gardens—as a type of nostalgia.

One such man is an 83 year old man named Stanley Underwood who is living in a place called Itawamba County in northeastern Mississippi, who still plows a big plot of ground ever year with his faithful mule; his own mule that he named “Hat” some years ago. Mr. Underwood tells us that he had acquired “Hat” from some Amish fellow in Tennessee who had originally named her “Pat” but Stanley didn’t like the name “Pat,” so he renamed her “Hat.”

Mr. Underwood actually owns 8 acres of land upon which he plants rows and rows of corn, beans and fruit. Mr. Underwood told newspaper reporters recently: “I can do a better job plowing my land with Hat than I ever could with a tractor!”

Mr. Underwood explained that when he hitched up Hat to his old plow he also puts blinders on her so that Pat would not be able to see in any other direction but straight ahead. Then he takes his place behind the plow. Then he throws a harness connected to the reins over his shoulder, grapping the handles of the plow steadily, while urging Pat to move forward with a clicking noise he learned to make 60 years ago from his father.

Mr. Underwood says that like his faithful mule Pat, who with the help of her blinders never diverts her eyes away from straight ahead, he has to have enough determination to do the very same thing. And it is imperative that the rows be perfectly straight; not only in the hopes of yield maximizing a good yield from his land, and to help make it easier to care for his crops while growing, but also because it is a matter of taking pride, a good sense of pride, in one’s work. Whatever the reason, once he had set his hand to the plow there could be no looking back at all.

Nothing that matters in life is ever accomplished without effort. Nothing that matters is ever accomplished without determination. Nothing that matters is ever accomplished without keeping one's eyes determinedly fixed on the goal. Have you ever heard that other old saying: "Nothing that ever mattered was accomplished in an eight-hour day!"?

Think of all those farmers who throughout many generations have known anything about an 8 hour day! Think about all those farmer's wives who also was up long before the crack of dawn to prepare breakfast for their husbands before the plowing began and had dinner ready at midday for their husbands and any other men who would be coming in from the field. They never knew anything about eight-hour days.

And can't we see Elijah and Elisha and Paul evidencing this same kind of commitment, by calling one another and the people they are serving to this same kind of determination and sacrifice too? At the end of our Old Testament lesson today we witness Elijah anointing Elisha to become his successor. When Elijah places his mantle on Elisha, while Elisha is plowing, by the way.

Elisha asks the same question as that unnamed prospective follower asked of Jesus. *"Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you."* That's when Elijah must have been feeling a little bit irritated at Elisha's request and asks Elisha pointblank: *"Go back again; after what I have done for you"* (1 Kings 19:20)?

Not only is there no mention of Elisha going back to bid his father and mother farewell, what is recorded is that Elisha slaughtered the team of oxen he was using to plow, then fed the people with them, and then left all behind to follow Elijah. Now that certainly demonstrates some real determination and sacrifice on Elisha's part to become a prophet!

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul is plowing in a different sort of field, when he wonders why those who have come to believe that we are indeed saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ alone, want to shackle one another again with some unnecessary burdens associated with some of those Old Testament Mosaic ceremonial laws! So Paul commands them: *"Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit yourselves once again to the yoke of slavery"* (Galatians 5:1)! *But never use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourselves"* (Galatians 5:14)!"

"This is the word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the LORD Almighty" (Zechariah 4:6).

"God has not given us a spirit of timidity and fear, but of power, love and self-control!" (2 Timothy 1:7).

"Let us hold fast to the confession of our faith without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:23-25!

But no other person's determination and sacrifice can ever even come close or top that of the Lord Jesus Christ himself! Paul writes to the Philippians: *"Even though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!*

Therefore God also has highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2:6-8)! **Amen**