

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
The Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 29, 2025
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62
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We began our scripture readings today with an account of two great Hebrew prophets, Elijah and Elisha. We heard how Elijah was taken up into heaven and Elisha remained to continue Elijah's work. Why hear this passage today? It is paired with the Gospel account of Jesus beginning his final journey to Jerusalem and the cross. Both passages emphasize how a life-mission draws to a close and others are called to take up the mission. Elijah has completed his work, and he is brought home to God; at the same time, Elisha is granted a "double portion" of Spirit with which to continue the work that Elijah had done. Jesus "sets his face" toward Jerusalem to indicate his determination to complete his work on the cross; we know, and Jesus trusts, that God will bring him home as well. Jesus' disciples, though not comprehending what was before them, would be left to carry out Jesus' work in the world. They would follow Jesus in both his mission and the cost of that work.

Before considering the reading from Luke's Gospel, I want to say a few words about the passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians. Much of this passage's meaning is clear and noteworthy. But Paul's presentation of Spirit and flesh as opposites of one another, with Spirit seen as "good" and flesh as "bad," can easily be misunderstood. Viewing the body and its needs as evil is not what Paul had in mind. If we look closely at his list of "the works of the flesh" in this morning's reading, we get a clue. He includes some "sins of the flesh" – fornication and drunkenness – but he also includes "idolatry," and this is most important. If I might put it this way, human beings have been known to misuse every one of God's good gifts, and one way we do that is by putting the satisfaction of our bodily needs and desires ahead of God and ahead of living according to what we understand to be God's will. This is idolatry. St. Paul reminds us that, as followers of Christ, we are to live by the commandment to love. Anything that interferes with, blocks, prevents or in any way is contrary to love needs to be turned away from. That is why he includes these "works of the flesh" – enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy. The Spirit – the Holy Spirit – is God, the Spirit of Love, and we are to be guided by this Spirit.

Now let's turn to our passage from Luke's Gospel. When we are on a journey, our destination affects our experience, doesn't it? We all know how different the same trip can be, depending on what lies at the end of the road. Are you on your way to a neighboring state for a family wedding or a family funeral? Are you driving to Damariscotta for lunch with beloved friends or a difficult medical test at Miles Memorial Hospital with results that might change your life? The road is the same road, but our experience of the journey is very different.

In today's lesson from Luke, we find that Jesus is on a journey, and the first few words tell us a great deal about what kind of journey it is. "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Jesus knew where his journey would end, and "he set his face to go to Jerusalem." Can you feel the strength of his resolve? It was time for Jesus to carry out the purpose of his life by journeying to Jerusalem, his will aligned with God's will. "He set his face to go." He was human, and he needed all his strength and all his will to journey in the right direction. Surely the disciples who traveled with Jesus recognized a change in him and felt his mood.

Jesus and his disciples had been in Galilee, and their way south to Jerusalem took them through Samaria. The Jews and the Samaritans held differing religious beliefs about scripture

and about worship. Each group looked down on the other. Not surprisingly, Jesus was not well received in a certain Samaritan village, and James and John seem to overreact. "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" I wonder if their response was connected to the seriousness of Jesus' mood, their recognition that this was a critical moment when people would choose to accept or reject Jesus and bear the consequences of their choice. Whatever was behind it, Jesus rebuked James and John for their vengeful reaction, and they moved on.

Luke tells us about three men who encountered Jesus as he walked toward Jerusalem. The first man approached Jesus and said, "I will follow you wherever you go." He freely offered to be a disciple, and Jesus replied with a warning about the way of discipleship: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." He challenged the man to consider the consequences of his choice, tested him to learn if he truly wanted to be the disciple of a homeless teacher.

Jesus approached the second man with a clear and succinct invitation to discipleship, "Follow me." The man postponed making a decision and said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus challenged the man to make a choice at that moment, a choice for life and God's kingdom or for death.

The third man approached Jesus and offered to follow him, with a condition: "let me first say farewell to those at my home." Again, Jesus confronted the man with a fact of discipleship: the way of following Jesus is a one-way journey. "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." A disciple must choose to go back or to go forward. Jesus is telling the man that he couldn't have it both ways.

Jesus has set his face to go to Jerusalem and the cross. He has made his choice to take that supremely difficult path. It is no wonder that his message about discipleship is stern. Do you want to follow me? Do you know what that may mean, what you may have to give up? Do you know that this is a choice between life and death? Are you willing to walk a hard road in my footsteps, even as I journey to Jerusalem and the cross? Jesus' call to discipleship is stern and demanding, brutally honest. Luke doesn't tell us what the men did after Jesus spoke to them. We don't know if they chose to follow Jesus or to return home.

As we follow Jesus there may be times and events in our lives when we, too, must make difficult choices. We may hear Jesus challenge us with hard questions. We may find that to walk in Jesus' footsteps we have to let go of what is comfortable and familiar, perhaps turn our backs on people and activities that draw us away from God. Discipleship is often costly.

So, we must never forget where we are headed. Yes, the way of Jesus is the way to Jerusalem and the cross. But we know that the cross was not the final end of Jesus' journey. We know about an empty tomb. We know about the risen Christ appearing to the women and men who loved him to give them assurance of his new and unending life. We know about his gift of the Holy Spirit. We know about Christ's promise to lead us home to God, where we will forever be with him.

Our destination is to be with Jesus, at home in God's house. Our Lord and Savior has opened the way for us to follow him there. Whatever the cost of discipleship may be, we must remember where we are going and who has gone ahead of us. For when we remember these things, we will find the courage to walk in love and peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.