

Sermonbytes – Sunday, June 26, 2016 Reading: Luke 9:51-(NIRV)

Back when I was taking my Theology Degree, Practical Theology was taught by John Klassen. One of the things that I learned to dread during class was one of his favorite phrases: "Now that sounds like a learning experience". Every time we had some plans go awry or things did not turn out like we had planned, he would remind us to take a look at what had happened and to turn into a learning experience.

Well this past month or so with this latest bout of pneumonia, it has been a learning experience of sorts. And as I share some of those learning's, I ask you to consider some of yours as well during times of challenge in your life

1. I'm not as young as I used to be...Which at times comes as a bit of a shock and a reality check
2. I am a terrible patient...I whine more than I think I should
3. Things work perfectly well in my absence...even though many people told me that I was missed
4. I am a bit of a control freak - though anyone looking at my office and desk would wonder at that one. I suppose I mean that I am used to being in control and my body doing what I tell it to. But the answer this time is I am not as much in control as I thought

I share these kernels of insight because our lesson today is about a number of things, but largely it is about change

Change is hard, especially change we did not expect or sign up for. Weddings and births and buying a house are challenging. But generally that is the kind of change we look forward to. On the other hand accidents, and job loss, and devastating illness bring change as well...and that's hard change, because when we go through it, we are not the ones in control. Perhaps that's why we work so hard to keep control of those things that seem under our power. And maybe, to move to this week's gospel reading, this also explains some of the reactions to Jesus' resolute journey to the cross.

To put this into context, Jesus' ministry up to this point has been mostly in Galilee, with the occasional foray into Judea. But now having largely finished with the healing and teaching ministry, Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem - a journey during which he will do his best to prepare the disciples to be disciples

There are three sets of reactions to Jesus decision to go to Jerusalem

The first is that of the Samaritans, who recognize that Jesus "has set his face to go to Jerusalem" and will not receive him. Given their history Samaritans did not support anything which saw people heading to Jerusalem. And so people would not have been surprised when they reject him.

The disciples, in turn, react to this rejection with a surprising – and frankly rather alarming! – request: they want to call down fire from heaven to devour the Samaritans.

Well, perhaps it's not as surprising as we'd like to think. Jews and Samaritans did not get along. The disciples were apparently not above ethnic prejudice, and they knew their biblical history enough to know that Elijah had done something similar years before (see 2 Kings 1). They also do not like to be thwarted in their plans. They were there to see that Jesus made it to Jerusalem, and anyone and everyone who stood in their way, well, you know. Talk about what happens when you feel out of control!

Others also have made plans. Yes, they'll follow Jesus, as soon as they've buried loved ones or made appropriate farewells. Seemingly reasonable requests like those immortalized in the Medical Mission Sisters' song "Come to the banquet":

I cannot come I have married a wife I have bought me a cow

Yet Jesus expects them to drop all their plans and follow him. Why? Because his time is limited and his next stage of the journey is one of training the disciples. Now we are all alike in that we want to be in control to maintain some semblance of order in a rather chaotic and confusing world. Yet Jesus in this passage is clearly not willing to concede that he demands that his mission come before all of our plans, even those that seem most reasonable. Why? Because he knows that we really aren't in control. That it's an illusion, and that a rainstorm, or tornado, or illness, or loss, or tragedy, or any one of a hundred other things may dash our hopes as well as our plans and bring us to ruin.

And what is he asking? Now some would say . . . He invites us to give over control to him. As tempting – and as pious – as that might sound, the passage in front of us does not go there. In reality: Jesus doesn't go to Jerusalem to assume command, or take charge. Rather, he goes to Jerusalem to thrust himself fully and completely into the messy chaos of life and death and to come out the other side.

So perhaps that's the promise of the Gospel – not that we can be in control, or even that God is in control, but rather that God in Jesus joins us where we are holds onto us, and brings us to the other side.

Look around. We invest a lot of time, energy, and money in being in control. And plenty of religious folks invite us to invest lots of time, energy, and money to surrender to God's control. Yet the world is still a terribly chaotic and unsettling place. So what if the deepest calling of a Christian disciple isn't to be in control – by ourselves or vicariously through God – but rather to take some risks, and to throw ourselves into this turbulent life and world that God loves so much, trusting that God will join us in the adventure, hold onto us through all the ups and downs, and brings us in time to the other side.

Maybe, just maybe, that's faith. And when we, like Jesus' first disciples, fall short yet again, then all we can do is give thanks that Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem. Not just with us but also for us, taking on our chaotic lot and joining us in our turbulent lives, that we may know that nothing – Nothing - Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

That's right - Nothing.