

TEXT: Luke 9:51-62 A Samaritan Village Refuses to Receive Jesus When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?' But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of the Human One has nowhere to lay his head.' To another he said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.' Jesus said to him, 'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'

TWO weeks ago we considered how easy it is to lose track of our very soul, the indwelling of God, the Christ consciousness, the place of imagination and embrace. Last week we talked about nurturing the soul with the easy tears and generous, grateful impulse of the woman who anointed Jesus. We talked about care of the soul as the freedom of forgiveness, the freedom from fear and the discovery of wholeness of self that Jesus himself demonstrated and holds out for us. This week we are invited to see how this wholeness of self, this care of the soul, is also the mandate to serve, to be prophetic, to be the hands and feet of Christ.

But I warn you, this is not a sweetness and light message. This is a sermon about commitment, much as the pig said to the chicken, as they walked past a breakfast place featuring ham and eggs – "To you it is a donation," the pig commented. "To me it is a commitment."

Care of the soul doesn't happen in a vacuum, but rather through our interactions with other people. One's own wholeness is not complete unless it is manifest in the world. The Book Group just completed *29 Gifts*, an invitation to service through gift-giving. The author notes that it is the commitment itself begins the process of change. Instead of getting lost in a sense of lack, we realize we are part of something bigger and that we do indeed have many gifts to offer the world. Serving out of obligation or responsibility, or perhaps out of guilt, we remain in scarcity mode, resentful and drained. Authentic service, out of love and gratitude, and humility, are those which fuel us, give us energy and purpose.

Thomas Moore wrote "It is impossible to care for the soul and live at the same time in unconsciousness." Mahatma Gandhi said "The best way to find oneself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

So, in today's Gospel reading, we join Jesus on the long journey to Jerusalem. Disciples James and John, the sons of Thunder, have just asked if they can call fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritan village that has rejected them. Jesus' answer is today's first lesson in discipleship: the destruction of one's enemies is not Christ's way. Just the opposite, Jesus' choice is to go through the villages of Samaria looking for hospitality, extending a hand of friendship to enemies, trying to bridge the divide. Love your enemies. *29 Gifts* reminds us that giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin – an exchange of energy, a universal transaction. As I am offering or accepting a gift, the part of me that is true spirit is connecting with the true spirit of another individual, and we are not in that instant connected to the divine force that created everything out of nothing, the light from which we all draw inspiration and energy. The soul does not allow hate and does not endorse contempt prior to investigation.

The next encounter is with an enthusiastic groupie who gushes "I will follow you wherever you go." But honesty is another facet of the soul. Did he really understand the commitment of following Jesus? To follow Jesus meant sharing his homelessness and rejection. Could he give up his safe world? Could he do that? Can we? Jesus warns against hopping on his bandwagon too readily. Discipleship is not for the soft or pampered; it involves sacrifice and self-denial. The costs are high.

A second person asks to bury his father before following Jesus. The answer seems harsh, "Let the dead bury the dead." But upon closer examination, we realize that if the man's father were already dead, he would not be out on the road-side. The tradition, as well as the practical necessity in a desert country, was to proceed to burial within 24 hours after death. What he is really saying to Jesus is this: "I will follow you *after* my father has died." That might be a year or 5 years or 10 or 20 or 30. He seems to say, "I'll catch you later."

The point Jesus makes is that in everything there is a crucial moment; if that moment is missed the thing most likely will never be done at all. The man in the story had stirrings in his heart to get out of his spiritually dead surroundings; if he missed that moment he would never get out. Living from the soul encourages us to face our reluctance without excuse and move forward, if not in certainty at least in confidence and faith.

The third man says, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." If the first person was a victim of impulsiveness, and the second a victim of reluctance, the third is a victim of indecisiveness. You know the excuses: Examples: "Let me phone my friend, then I'll do my homework."  
"Let me finish this pack of cigarettes, then I'll quit."  
"Let me finish this piece of cake, then I'll go on a diet."

Jesus replies, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God". It is not this man's family that is holding him back. No, it is his own hesitation, his own inability to break with the past; bound by the "old," he misses the "new." The demands of God's reign of love present us with a higher loyalty than even family.

I heard someone say recently, "I know a lot of people who say they are Christians, but not too many who act like it". That kind of reality check is long standing.

A businessman well known for his ruthlessness, not a nice fellow at all, once announced to writer Mark Twain, "Before I die I mean to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I will climb Mount Sinai and read the 10 Commandments aloud at the top." "I have a better idea," replied Twain. "You could stay in Boston and keep them."

The Call (then and now) is to unconditional commitment,... to total commitment with

- No reservations
- No hesitation
- No strings attached.

The costs are high; the time is now; and the way is forward. Jesus was no farmer but he knew that plowing requires that one's eyes be fixed ahead, immediately ahead in case of rocks, and frequently all the way toward some distant landmark so that the furrow is straight. Most people are forever glancing over their shoulders, worried about something in the past, some mistake, some sin, some missed opportunity.

Another mistake in plowing is to be sure you have set your rows in the most beneficial sites. But I have known a lot of folks who can plow a straight line from a hurtful word first spoken years ago until the day they are laid to rest in that casket made out of bitterness, using a finely honed grudge which is able to give them a furrow in which to sow their seeds of anger behind them as they move from year to year.

I have seen a lot of folks who can freehand a chalk line that runs straight and true from that first nudge of envy over what another has or does until it comes to end in that obsession which one can just never let go.

I have been around folks who carry a level with them, ready to whip it out to determine whether or not a friend spends equal time with them as with others; to judge whether or not a parent's love is handed out in the same amounts to them as it is to their siblings; to measure if their happiness is on the same plane as those who sit around them in church, at work, in the neighborhood.

In Romans, Paul said, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God re-mold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity." (Roman 12:2, Phillips translation)

The kingdom does not belong to us, we belong to the kingdom. It demands a quest for mercy and for justice in this world, it demands speaking truth to power. If we are alert, we will notice the troubled person who needs a good listener and the colleague who needs encouragement. We will see the principle that needs defending and the underdog who needs befriending.

It might mean some prophetic outrage on behalf of undocumented immigrants or health care reform or corporate or governmental reform or efforts on behalf of the earth and environment. It might mean walking your neighbors dog or calling on a shut-in or working on a garden or reading poetry. What about returning the correct change or cultivating patience in a conversation. Care of the soul might include the Pride Day march or AIDS walk, or work at St Martins or service as a greeter, or reader. Service is for you to discern. That is your option. What is not your option is to ignore the need for commitment, at any cost, going to any length. We are here for the kin-dom come, and that is an action call.

There are three things that every Christian must forget:  
sins which God has forgiven,  
failures whose lessons have been learned,  
the false gods we served before we met Jesus.

And there are three things that every Christian must remember:  
Too much EGO means Edging God Out. Let go and let God. Soul means serving others,  
understanding love. God's intension for us is wholeness, and a way of living that is  
both/and, rarely either/or.  
May it be so.