**June 30, 2013 – 6 Pentecost (Proper 8)**

**© Jean E. Mornard**

*"When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."*

Putting the healings and parables and travelling throughout Galilee behind him, Jesus now turns towards Jerusalem to accomplish his final, most important task on earth – the salvation of the world. That's not to say that there won't be many more miracles and teaching, but this is the turning point in Luke's Gospel and everything from this moment on will be focusing on the climactic ending.

As they are travelling, one of the disciples tells Jesus that he will follow him anywhere. Rather than being gratified and commending that disciple, Jesus rather tersely tells him that birds and animals have homes, but he, the Son of Man, is basically homeless. He strongly implies that anyone who follows him will be homeless, too.

I'm pretty sure this isn't what the disciple wanted to hear! How about throwing me a bone here Jesus? How about, "Thank you for being my follower," or "It's nice to have my loyal friends with me on this last journey," or SOMETHING encouraging!

But following Christ is about embracing homelessness, in the sense that it's about giving up worldly security ... perhaps even the security of knowing where you are going to sleep at night. How many of us, when push comes to shove, are really willing to do that?

I've never been homeless, and I pray to God that none of us will ever have to experience that. But I also pray to God that if I were called to give up my home for the cause of Christ, I would be able to do it. It's something we all have to think about, and continually test our own limits on. Because if we're not willing to give up anything and everything that we own, how could we possibly think about giving up our very lives to Jesus' service?

The Christian path is not necessarily an easy one to follow.

So Jesus leaves that disciple scratching his head and turns to another. "You there! Yes, you, in the back. Are you going to follow me?"

"Sure thing, Jesus!" he replies. "Only, I just found out that my father has died and I have to head home to be at his funeral. It's a family thing. My mother would kill me if I didn't get home in time – you know how it is! But I promise as soon as he's buried I'll catch up with you." But Jesus tells him, pretty harshly, to leave the dead to bury their own, or in other words to leave his family obligations and to focus on proclaiming the kingdom of God.

And finally another disciple, who was apparently either not paying attention or not too quick on the uptake, says, "I'll follow you, Jesus, just as soon as I pop home and say good bye to my family. It'll probably be awhile before I see them again, so I want to remember them while I'm on the road." And Jesus tells him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

This statement actually isn't quite as hard as it sounds in our English translation. The word for "fit" is *euthetos* and it means well suited and useful, so when Jesus says that someone who looks back won't be fit for the kingdom, he doesn't mean that they won't deserve it, but rather that they won't be as useful as they would be if they focused forward.

If you've ever seen someone plowing behind a horse or an ox, you realize that the person has to be looking ahead at all times because if his attention wanders and especially if he looks back over his shoulder, he'll no longer be plowing in a straight line. In other words, he isn't doing a good job at the task he's been given. It's the same with us. We can't be effective proclaimers of the Gospel if we're always looking back or living in the past – the Good Old Days.

We are always occupied with our security and comfort, with our worldly and family obligations, and with what has come before us. Where does that leave Jesus? Obviously, we have to live in the world. It's not practical, or even reasonable to pull a St. Francis and leave all our clothes on the steps and wander out into the world completely untethered by worldly interests. And yet, that is what Jesus is telling us to do. It's a paradox.

Well, one way we can start to accomplish both is to always put God first. A lovely woman I met at the Diocese of New Jersey once told me, "My feet don't hit the floor in the morning before I have thanked God for all my blessings."

Before we get out of bed, we can thank God for the gift of a good night's rest and ask for his blessing on the coming day.

Before we eat our meals, we can thank God for the blessing of food to eat, and ask for his compassion on those who are hungry.

Before we head out for the day, we can thank God for a home to leave and a job to go to, and ask for his pity on those who are homeless and jobless.

And on and on throughout the day until we say one last weary prayer of thanksgiving before falling asleep. This is a beautiful way to live a life that honors God.

But there's more to truly following Jesus than just being grateful and praying, as we see in today's Gospel. The common factors in these three little vignettes are sacrifice and action. These people aren't strangers off the street who come up to talk to Jesus. These are his devoted disciples, who have been following him all throughout Galilee. And yet, he still asks more of them. More sacrifice and more action.

And that's what Jesus is asking of us today. Sacrifice and action. And he's not asking it of us only as individuals, but also as a community of Christ. He's asking Grace Episcopal Church for sacrifice and action.

Over the past several months, we've talked a lot about the need for outreach. What we can do, who we can serve, and how. Now the time has come to really put our heads down and do the work God has given us to do. Over the coming weeks, I would like us all to focus on our outreach efforts in terms of sacrifice and action.

Outreach is two words – out and reach. We have to go out to where the need is, not expect it to come to us, even though that means leaving our comfort zones. And we have to reach farther than we would have thought possible to find the means to help.

We may have to spend more money than we think we can afford, which in turn may mean stepping up our level of giving. We may have to spend more time than we think we have, and put out more effort than we think we could possibly drum up the energy for. And we will need to put more trust in God than we ever have before, which is where the life of prayer and gratitude are so vitally important.

But before we can do any of these things, we need to know what it is we should be doing. This is not about bringing people to Grace. This is about bringing Grace to people – as many as we can touch. I would like everyone here to put on their thinking caps and come up with some outreach ideas. Tell me what they are, no matter how outrageous! And I hope a few of you will step up to serve on an outreach committee to refine those ideas into action plans that we as a parish can accomplish together.

This will be a group effort. Jesus set pretty high standards for his followers, but he needed and wanted those followers to accompany him on his final journey to Jerusalem. Just like he needs and wants us. He needs and wants us to make sacrifices and to take action, in order to proclaim the kingdom of heaven to all that we meet.

Let's all rise to this challenge right now, and together, with joy and gratitude, follow our Lord into Jerusalem.

Amen.