

Sermon for the 5th Sunday after Pentecost 2010

Cole Guberth, in his commentary on the Gospel, says that as Jesus prepares for the journey to Jerusalem, he does not sound like a good recruiter. “He’s turning away willing volunteers! What’s more, he seems to be discounting the value of home and family, the very things we hold most dear....Could Jesus really be saying that following him means not giving so much as a backward glance to the ones we love?”

Did you find this reading from the Gospel of Luke at all confusing? “Follow me and you will no longer have shelter,” perhaps just like the homeless we often find here in our alcoves. And it gets worse. “Follow me and walk away from the safety and security of family ties. “Follow me and turn your back on your obligations to your parents.” Are those of us who are preachers to encourage you to do the same? As one of our shut-ins said to me after I read the gospel, what is Jesus asking of us today? It certainly challenges all of us to examine our priorities.

I recently found story of putting your hand to the plow and looking back like my own. As soon as I was big enough (when I was around 10 years old), I just knew that I was able operate our tiller. I asked my dad if I could plow my grandmother’s acre or more garden. I know that he was scared that the tiller would get away from me and I would destroy what was already planted. Plowing requires concentration, focus, and something I did not have...the desire to keep looking ahead and not look behind. He would line me up with some mark at the end of the field, a stick, a pole, or a tree. As the story goes, I too was more interested in what was happening behind me, and I would turn around. That is when I would get off course and my straight row would be one with many curves. Of course dad would then take over.

Often we spend too much time looking back and forget where we are and where we want to go. In all of the churches that I have served, even those who have just completed building programs, there is a strong desire to return to the 1950s, when the Sunday Schools were huge. In the good old days, classes were held in all of the rooms in all three buildings across the Plaza and in the kitchen of the parish hall as well. Isn’t it a whole lot easier to reflect on the good old days than to get excited about where we are now and where we could go?

Does your life look like a meandering stream or a crooked row? Often I think mine does. How hard has it been for you to stay on track? How strong is your desire to follow Jesus wherever he might lead you?

Marilyn Salmon writes that Jesus has disciples eager to follow him at the outset of his journey. However his instructions to would-be disciples seem harsh and unreasonable.

His words here may strike us as uncharacteristic of our image of Jesus. Some commentators question whether or not Jesus could possibly have spoken them. Whether or not they represent Jesus' own words, they make an important point about discipleship. Jesus' response to legitimate requests to postpone the journey reminds Christians in every generation that there are always justifiable excuses to defer the journey or put off the claims of discipleship. Other important matters compete for our attention. Some must make heart-wrenching choices, but there is urgency about Jesus' mission to bring forth God's reign. Jesus compels us to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This is our Christian vocation and must be our first priority.

Getting back to setting our priorities as a congregation, according to *The Clergy Journal*, if Saint Andrew's represents the typical church:

- more of the people in our pews are totally loyal to a brand of toothpaste than to the Episcopal Church;
- one-third of the people joining us for worship on Sunday morning have no specific loyalty at all to the Episcopal Church; and
- 84 percent would be willing to consider switching denominations.

Growing denominational awareness and loyalty within the congregation is not the same thing as selling televisions or mouthwash, but it does have many common elements. While we are not selling a brand of any of the above it does require:

- understanding what those of you in the pews believe, feel, and think right now-- our focus groups have helped considerably in this area;

- understanding what makes St. Andrew's Episcopal Church different from others;
- understanding how and why our congregation can make a difference to members and affect their lives;
- making a conscious, consistent effort to share who we are in the communities which surround us; and
- clearly, concisely, and repeatedly communicating what is distinctive about St. Andrew's to newcomers, members, and the community in a way that is relevant to them.

Following Jesus requires that each one of us be able and willing to invite others to become part of our community of faith and when visitors or newcomers arrive at our door on their own, that each of us be willing and able to share what we believe, what we have to offer, and why they might like to share in our ministries.

Make it a point to contact someone you have not seen in church lately, and remember to greet newcomers and others you might not know. It is important that all be invited to journey with us. And, as the Gospel reminds us, there is no time to waste.

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