

June 30, 2019  
St. Martin's, Williamsburg, VA  
Pentecost III (RCL/C)  
A sermon by the Rt. Rev. James B. Magness

"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Folks, I've never been enamored by the idea of creating titles for my sermons. My Baptist and Presbyterian friends have always told me that I am missing a good opportunity to entice people to church on Sunday so they can hear me explain the intriguing title to my homily. According to Randy, a Baptist colleague, this is the way it works. If you're going to be in the pulpit on Sunday, early in the week you need to think up a snappy title for your sermon. Then, at the very latest, on Tuesday morning you post that title on the flashing LED sign out in front of your church. "Randy," I asked, "what happens if later in the week as you get into the study of the scriptures for your sermon preparation and you sense God leading you to some different conclusions that causes you change the theme of your sermon?" In particular I asked him, "Do you change the sermon title on the flashing LED sign?" "Oh, for goodness sake, no," Randy replied. "Once you've set the hook to get them in the door, just keep reeling them in and hope that they'll take the new bait."

This week I am going to break my rules. Since St. Martin's hasn't yet erected their electronic sign, I'll just give you the title for this sermon: Think at Least Twice before Following Me.

Have you ever heard of the "None Zone?" The Pacific Northwest and Seattle/Tacoma, Washington in particular, is known by sociologists of religion as the "None Zone." When asked about their religious preferences, residents of the Pacific Northwest have the distinction of saying "none of the above." In fact, they say "none of the above" at a rate higher than the residents of any other part of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Lest you think that something recently happened to make make this the "none zone," think again. In 1914, over one hundred years ago, there was a symposium held in Seattle to determine what happened to the faithful church members who had moved from the East to Seattle. When they got there the vast majority of them lost any and all inclinations to even attend worship services.<sup>2</sup>

This "none zone" behavior is a vivid contrast to the commitment Jesus expects of the three men who wanted to be his followers. Jesus' expectation is a good 180 degrees out from the "nones." It's worth taking a look at how Jesus related to these three.

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<sup>1</sup> Kristy Farber, "Preaching Pentecost in a Secular Context," in Journal for Preachers, Pentecost 2019 (Montreat, NC), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia O'Connel, Killeen and Mark Silk, Ed's., Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press 2004) 9.

The first one honored Jesus with a sweeping statement that he would follow Jesus wherever Jesus went. Jesus told the would-be follower that he didn't know what he was talking about: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." It is as if Jesus is telling the man, "Fellow, you have no idea about the life to which you are committing yourself. To follow Christ means a reordering of your life that includes the possibility that life may never be comfortable again."

The next man also wanted to follow Jesus, but first he had to go home and be a part of the funeral for his dead father. As a faithful Jew, Jesus would have known quite well that the rituals of mourning were very complicated and very involved. Even today for the religious Jew there are five stages of mourning. Shiva, for example, is the third stage and lasts for seven full days. Following the grief and despair immediately after the death, shiva is the time when family members sit with one another to discuss their loss and give comfort.<sup>3</sup>

We can only assume that the man wanted to go home and participate in those expected rituals. Yet, Jesus and his mission will not be deterred, even by a death in the family.

The third man also wants to follow Jesus, but first longs to say goodbye to his family and friends before he follows in the footsteps of Jesus. As with the other two, Jesus senses a lack of resolve and commitment in the man's desire to return home. Those who hesitate and falter are not Jesus' people. For Jesus, committed determination is the bedrock characteristic of discipleship.

Then Jesus gives that beautiful and literally earthy example of plowing a field: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." How many of you have actually plowed a field? My wife was a farm girl. Shortly after we got married we obtained the use of a one-acre plot of land to plant a vegetable garden. With the exception of the occasional camping trip I had rarely been on a farm. Essentially, I had no idea of what I was doing. However, right away I was taken by the gasoline engine rota-tiller. It made noise, endlessly vibrated and moved forward. What was there not to like about it. As the rota-tiller operator, I was using it to break up the soil and make furrows in which to plant seeds and small plants, I was determined to make straight rows. In order to do that, I kept looking behind me as I walked forward with the machine, thinking that looking back would help me to know if my row was or was not straight. You can imagine what happened. My rows were all over the place. My wife watched all of this. Quite amused at her non-farmer husband, she told me to select a point ahead of me and walk toward that point. Looking ahead with determination is the only way to make a straight row; the only way to go where you need to go. If you put your hand to the plow and look back, you'll never achieve the mission.

Jesus needs to be surrounded by those who will be focused upon the point on the horizon while plowing. Jesus will allow nothing to distract him from his forward movement toward Jerusalem.

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<sup>3</sup> Lamm, Maurice (1969). The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David Publishers). ISBN 0-8246-0126-2.

Discipleship is costly; not cozy and comfortable. The journey to Jerusalem is not a vacation. It is a vocation, and an extreme one at that. We believe Jesus knew that in Jerusalem the pain and discomfort of the cross awaited.

It is radical to be told that the journey is not about resting comfortably in the “good” life of the kingdom of God, and that every other demand in life must be secondary to the extraordinary demands of being Jesus’ disciples.

Earlier this week most of the members of St. Martin’s received a letter from your rector challenging you to use whatever means you have to support the sojourning families and individuals at our southern border. Numerous are the words of Jesus asking us to care for the needs of the disenfranchised and the dispossessed. As I told your rector, this is a call that is not political. It is about the needs of human beings, many of whom are a great deal like you and me. It is about mothers, fathers and children. It is about people who have used up their last measure of hope and are looking to us for help. This is the type of discipleship that is costly and less than comfortable.

The story of Jesus and the three wanna-be followers speaks loudly to me, and I hope will speak loudly to our candidates for confirmation and reception. The call to put your hand to the plow and never turn around to look back is a call to be converted from the pursuit of my desires to the pursuit of Jesus hand upon our lives. This is a calling to pivot and turn from our desires and, as Jesus pursued his course toward Jerusalem, set the course of our lives toward the Lord Jesus. We are challenged and called to do a full 180-degree pivot, turning our gaze from our needs to the needs of the other. Perhaps this is the time to ask: To what am I attached today that keeps me from following Jesus fully and freely?

Jesus is calling us to commit no less than our emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual lives to the mission set before us. Haste at getting there is not nearly as important as being focused upon the mission. President Abraham Lincoln is recorded to have said, “I walk slowly, but I never walk backward.”<sup>4</sup>

Your calling, my calling, our calling is to walk with Jesus and to bear witness to Jesus’ Lordship of our lives. In and through our witness God’s people are being made whole and renewed. AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> See discussion in Respectfully Quoted: A Dictionary of Quotations (Mine-ola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2010), 287, entry 1534.