



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

Sunday, July 1, 2007

Proper 8C by The Rev. Donna Barr

Jesus is on a mission, and ahead are his most difficult steps. Jesus' disciples now have a choice: will they have the courage to join with him in the suffering and humiliation that will inevitably follow, or will they choose to stay in the relative security of their native Galilee. Are they called to be disciples and follow this path? This is what some would say is where the rubber meets the road. Are you coming or not? We read today in our Gospel, that Jesus, realizing to some extent what is ahead, "set his face" toward Jerusalem. Luke says that Jesus' life will end with him being "lifted up"; that he will attain glory only through rejection, suffering, and death. Jesus does not seek to by pass the suffering, but rather meets it head on. The first incident, therefore, in Luke's narrative today, begins with rejection. Since the most direct route for Jesus to take from Galilee to Jerusalem was through Samaria, messengers were sent to prepare the way. But they received no hospitality. After lodging in another village they continue on their way the following day. Now we hear the words of Jesus to three "would be followers," people like you and me, who desire to follow and who want to commit their lives to Christ.

To the first man, his advice was, "Before you follow me, count the cost. Think about what you are doing." To follow me you will be asked to risk everything...perhaps.....your home.....your reputation....your money....perhaps even your very life. Jesus' words to the second man, although seemingly strange, "Let the dead bury the dead," meant, "What are you waiting for.....follow me now," making the point that in everything there is a crucial moment. Jesus knew the man in the story had stirrings in his heart to get out of his spiritually dead surroundings, but if he missed that moment he might never get out. Psychologists tell us that every time we have the desire to do good and do not act on it, the less likely we are to act on it at all. The emotion becomes the substitute for the action.

His words to the third man state a truth which no one can deny. No ploughman ever ploughed a straight furrow looking back over his shoulder. The Christian marches onward; not backward but forward.

Following Jesus is.....costly..... it must be done at the critical moment.....and the would be disciple.... you and I must not look back. Oswald Chambers says, that we need to be reminded of the stern, heroic stuff Jesus Christ always spoke of when he talked about discipleship. "If any one would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." In events surrounding the tragedy of 9/11 we have witnessed courageous people who took these words seriously.

When a firefighter loses his life trying to save a child from a burning building, people do not usually wonder why the rescuer died. Rather, they admire the bravery even as they mourn a fallen hero. Firefighters know the risks they take for the common good; they have counted their costs, they act in the critical moment and they don't look back. So it was no surprise that fire crews charged into the burning towers on September 11 to rescue and save countless strangers.

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Nor was it any surprise to those who knew an executive named Susan who stayed at her post high in the North Tower to make sure every single one of hundreds of employees had escaped safely though her actions cost her own life. Even in the face of seemingly inevitable doom, choice is possible. The passengers of Flight 93 who rebelled against their captors and brought down the fourth plane before it crashed into the Capitol or White House rejected victim hood. They chose instead to make their lives a sacrificial offering for the common good. These people and many like them have counted the costs, acted in the critical moment and never looked back.

For many of us, we have never had to make such critical choices. But the courageous acts of those on September 11<sup>th</sup> remind us all that we must be ready to take up our own crosses, and that we had better live out the courage, kindness, and the love we want to *see* in the world, the compassion we hope to receive when it is our turn. Not that we'll have it all together and won't make any mistakes at the critical moment of our lives. Not that we'll be sinless. Not that we'll agree on everything. None of these things will certify our discipleship. The imprint of our love for Jesus and his love for us will be shown in the way we give ourselves to one another. What will be the cost for us? Will we be willing and ready at the critical moment, and are we committed to never look back?

As I ponder these questions, I think of your community, St. John's Episcopal Church, Versailles, Kentucky. You have been an inspiring example to me and our diocese of courageous discipleship. Recently, you faced a critical moment in your parish life. With amazing courage and a deep sense of commitment you remained true to the mission of Jesus Christ. You didn't shrink away in fear; you didn't turn back; you stepped out in faith and put your hope and trust in the One who transforms our broken lives and broken communities. Setting our faces toward Jerusalem is to tilt our heads and hearts in ways that urge us to see things as never before, urge us to walk in directions we might never have walked, and to show kindness and love in a very broken world. Discipleship is not about what we are doing or not doing; it is instead about who we are. It is about whom we finally put our hope and trust in everyday.

Now, who will know we are Christians by our love? *Everyone will witness it*, Jesus says. It will be a story in which we step into a hurting world and actively participate in its healing. People will *see* it, not just our friends or our church, but..... *Everyone*. Let us step out with courage for the cost is our very life in Christ.....let us today reaffirm this critical moment.....and let us go forth in the name of Christ.

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

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