

Sermon on 5 Pentecost C: Luke 9:51-62

July 1, 2007 @ Custer Lutheran Fellowship by Pastor David Van Kley

The Road Less Traveled

With whom do you associate these words? “On the road again, just can’t wait to get on the road again.” Right. But Willie Nelson was not the first musician to use that image. As a child, I loved my parents’ Roger Miller record—and my favorite song was “King of the Road.”

These days—and despite the price of gas, almost everyone is a king of the road. Kent and Elisabeth just returned from England, as did Liz Kleffner. The highways and byways of the Black Hills are choked with cars and motorcycles with license plates from other states. Here and everywhere people are taking “road trips.”

The context of today’s gospel lesson is a road trip. Previously, Jesus had taught and healed in northern Israel, in and around Galilee. Now, he turns his face to the south toward Jerusalem—and the cross. Right in the way, just as Wyoming lies right between Custer and the state of Utah, was the land of Samaria. When Jesus and the disciples attempted to stop in a Samaritan village, they were turned away. Why? Well, you’ve probably heard enough sermons to know that Jews and Samaritans did not see eye to eye. Among many other things, the Samaritans believed it was important to worship God on Mt. Gerizim, *not* in Jerusalem. When they heard that Jesus and the disciples were on their way to *Jerusalem* to celebrate the Passover, they turned a cold shoulder. It’s an old, old story—prejudice and conflict rooted in religion.

How did the disciples respond? They were ticked off! *So* ticked off, in fact, that they ask Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command *fire* to come down from heaven and *consume* those Samaritans?”

Sound extreme? But remember our nation’s response to the 9-11 attacks. Our first impulse was for *revenge*—which led quickly to “shock and awe” in Iraq, a military version of fire from heaven.

Sound extreme? Well, yes! Until I remember how I’ve felt when someone hurts me, how very much I want to get back at them. Resentment within us can burn as hot as the Four Mile Fire.

“Lord, should we call down fire from heaven and consume them?” Jesus rebuked the disciples and re-routed their trip. In effect, he said, “Don’t take rejection personally. Don’t let yourselves get hooked into a culture war.”

I believe he was also saying what Susan Werner sings on her CD, *Gospel Truth*:

Thy kingdom come to every nation;
Thy will be done in everything we do.
Lord, lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from those who think they’re you.”

That is, leave vengeance to God.

The year is 1972. Controversy surrounding a trial brought the leaders of the American Indian Movement into Custer where they set fire to the courthouse. The community responded with a strong police presence. Average citizens armed themselves and stood on top of buildings, brandishing guns. I'm not sure any shots were actually fired, but the town's peace was shattered. Schools were closed for days. A long-standing cultural and religious tension boiled over. A conflict which began at Plymouth and Jamestown, continued at Wounded Knee and the Little Big Horn. Before 1972, I'm told, there were many Native Americans in Custer; afterward, very few.

How far is it from Custer to the Pine Ridge Indian reservation? About 66 miles, via Highways 385 and 18. Not very far! But who drives that road? Who from Custer takes road trips to Pine Ridge? Who from Pine Ridge takes road trips to Custer? What if Jesus were our travel agent?

After being rejected at one Samaritan village, Jesus and the disciples traveled to another. On the way, they talked. One promised: "I will follow *wherever* you go." Jesus said, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." As if to say, "don't count on a warm welcome when you're hanging out with me. Don't expect people to roll out the red carpet for you on the way of the cross."

Another said, "I'm ready, Lord; but first, let me go and bury my father." Another said: "I'll come, but let me say goodbye first." Jesus' response seems heartless. Let the dead bury the dead. Either get to work plowing the field now or go back to the house: you *can't* do both!

Those certainly are disturbing and challenging words! Yet, I believe that 99% of the time, Jesus would *encourage* us, as disciples, to bury our fathers and say warm and loving goodbyes. Here, he does not, because of the disciples' attitude toward the Samaritan people. They have not grasped that radical character of discipleship. That it's not a pleasure cruise. That following Jesus is costly. That love involves risk. And that, if you want to follow Jesus, nothing else can stand in the way.

When I look back at old sermons on this text, I have spent a lot of time talking about the excuses people use when they don't come to church, most of which are not as good as going home to bury your father. They have to do with soccer tournaments and golf outings, youth basketball and sleeping in, entertaining guests and preparing dinner, not wanting to miss the kickoff of the early football game.

It is amazing the things we allow to stand between us and God. It would be encouraging if even one family would stand up to the sports organizers and say, "no, we're not going to participate in that tournament if it means that we can't go to church on Sunday." Some things are more important than my child's athletic career.

That being said, I would add that worship attendance is only the proverbial tip of the iceberg, the very beginning of discipleship. Going to worship regularly is like a putting on your coat before heading outside to work in the cold winter air. If you put on the coat, only to sit around the warm house, what good is that?

Discipleship is a road trip. It begins at the font and altar, but it happens out there, on life's highways and byways. It takes us places we never thought we'd go, into relationships with people who are *other* than us—*other* than what we are comfortable with. *Samaritans*.

Maybe for us in Custer, South Dakota, the road to Jerusalem leads right through Pine Ridge. It did for Sam and Allison, Hannah and Jesse, and Nina these last weeks.

“What good news is there in that?” asks the Lutheran within us. Well, *none*, if we are looking for something to let us off the hook. If we're searching for the kind of Christianity that is practical, that leads to financial success and a comfortable life, this text is *not* good news. But, if we're looking for God to forgive all of our failings by calling us once again to follow Jesus, this text *dances* with good news. Every time we come to worship, we walk to the font, where we are forgiven and called once again to walk out of the building and down the road with Christ, wherever he might lead and to whomever he might send us.

Will it take you to the doorstep of that relative with whom you can't get along? Or to the Habitat house, hammer in hand? To the nursing home, to sit with the disabled? To the homes of the elderly, with meals on wheels? To prison? To Nicaragua or Colombia? There are many paths to walk with Jesus.

This last week, the road ended for a friend of mine, Lance Roberts. Sixty-five years old, he was found dead of a heart attack in bed. No family history, no symptoms. He'd planted 1000 trees the day before. The oldest guy still playing city league basketball. An excellent pastor, he gave himself to the life and ministry of the church. An extraordinary husband, father, and friend, he loved even when people took him places he never expected to go. He loved the outdoors, hunting, fishing, and hiking—all those Michigan manly things—but he also was a “tree hugger,” who cared for the environment. He was full of life. Full of passionate service. Not perfect, but Christ's. And when he lay down his pack this week, it was only to take it up again, with the risen Lord.

Surely, there are many ways to follow Jesus. It is not something you can do with half a heart. Nor can you do it while looking back over your shoulder. You can't do it without taking risks. It is the calling that swallows up all of our other callings. The journey between font and cross, church and world, from birth to death and beyond, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.