**Sermon Study - Luke 9:51-62**

**Sunday:** June 26, 2016

**Sunday of the Church Year:** Sixth Sunday after Pentecost - Year C

**Old Testament:**      1 Kings 19:14–21

**Psalm** Psalm 62

**New Testament:**      Galatians 5:1, 13–25

**Gospel:**              Luke 9:51–62

**The Three Scripture Lessons:**

The OT lesson shows Elijah being led to anoint Elisha as his successor. The call to lead God’s people was an “all in” proposition. It took total dedication and Elisha was ready. God knew Elisha’s heart when he sent Elijah. In the epistle lesson Paul says that the freedom we have in Christ is given to us so that we will live a life dedicated from the heart to displaying the goodness and power of the gospel by the way we live. You might say that it is the vocation of the Christian life and the priesthood of all believers. Then in the Gospel lesson (i.e. the sermon text), showcases Jesus calling his disciples to a life of love for people and total abandonment of all other number one priorities. All three texts show us was faith driven dedication to God looks like. The preacher will be very careful to maintain gospel motivation and power throughout his sermon and reading introductions. It needs to be: “Christ empowers you to be different” and not, “you ought to be different.”

**The Old Testament Lesson: 1 Kings 19:14-21**

Elijah starts out in the mouth of the cave depressed and feeling all alone in his devotion to God. God tells him that he will soon be turning over the ministry to Elisha, Hazael and Jehu. God reminds Elisha that he, God, has reserved 7,000 people who have not worshiped Baal. Then Elisha finds Elisha and calls him to be his successor as a prophet of the LORD. Elisha shows full commitment to the calling by killing his oxen and burning up his plow. Elisha shows us the only proper response to a holy, loving God, complete and faithful obedience.

**The Epistle Lesson: Galatians 5:1,13-25**

Many critics of the gospel will say that if we preach and unconditional gospel that it will create a sense of license in the heart of the believer that leads to a life of ease, laxity and immorality. Paul shows that the freedom that Christ brings is a freedom to do the will of God from the heart. Grace leads us into a godly life filled with the fruits of the Spirit and not to the freedom to sin. (Comparative reading: Romans 8)

**Commentary The Sermon Text: Luke 9:51-62**

**Background:** This text is the Gospel lesson for the Sixth Sunday after Easter in Year C of our Three Year Lutheran Lectionary Series. Jesus was in his third year of his ministry. Many call it, “The Year of Opposition.” Most harmonies of the Gospels place these events after the transfiguration and close to Jesus’ passion. It falls in what some call Jesus’ Perean ministry. The opening verse starts a new section of Luke, “Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem”. (Luke 9:51) The Greek phrase συμπληροῦσθαι τὰς ἡμέρας ἀναλήμψεως αὐτοῦ - indicates that Jesus was now in full knowledge of the events of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. For Jesus (and Luke) the ascension that would complete his earthly life in glory was the joyful end, not the Passion or even the resurrection. The ascension would mark the end of his once for all life and the beginning of his repeated restoration of humanity through the gospel and sacraments as he ruled from glory. The verb συμπληροῦσθαι mean fulfilled and reminds us of Galatians 4:4, “When the time had fully come”. ἐστήρισεν**–** means that he steadfastly set his face (i.e. his direction) toward Jerusalem. He knew his mission. He welcomed it gladly because he loved us with joy (Hebrews 12:1-13) and so he embraced the events that would soon take place.

In Luke 9:44, Jesus had for the second time told his disciples about his impending suffering and death. The disciples were still not “getting it” and lapsed into an argument about which of them was the greatest. Since Jesus was heading for Jerusalem, he decided to go straight through Samaria, instead of circumventing that region as so many Jews would do to avoid prejudice and trouble. He traveled with quite a band of followers and he was very well known as the teacher/healer from Galilee. If a Samaritan village were to welcome him, it would cost them time, energy and money and they would have to “tolerate” his impactful presence (i.e. teaching and doing miracles). ἑτοιμάσαι – in this context this word for “prepare” means that the disciples were asking that the Samaritan village make special sizable accomodations for their famous Jewish teacher who was headed to Jerusalem. It would not only be a lot of work but it would be a lot of work for a man they did not esteem, nor his people. They were not willing and showed disdain for his visit. James and John were probably the messengers sent to see if there was a willing reception. Whether or not they were the messengers, they become the first to react to the news that the village wants nothing to do with Jesus.

**Luke 9:52-53**

***52And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; 53but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. 54When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, “Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?” 55But Jesus turned and rebuked them. 56Then he and his disciples went to another village.***

No one knows who the messengers were, but it seems that they were James and John. The verb ἰδόντες – seems to indicate that the James and John were those two messengers who “saw” firsthand the rejection of the Samaritans. They were close to it and it angered them. Whether they were or not, they show great loyalty to Jesus and a strong sense of justice. This is natural for the “opinion of the law” in every person. James and John may have thought they were in the same place as Elijah who called down fire in justice on the prophets of Baal. But their attitudes were not consistent with gospel benevolence. The Trinity is patient with this planet beyond any human imagination (e.g. 120 years in Genesis 6 before the flood, God with Pharaoh in Exodus, Exodus 34:5-7, 2 Peter 3:9-10). James and John thought they were acting out of faith but they weren’t. The verses in the NIV footnote have less ancient evidence for inclusion than they do for exclusion from the text. They get a “C” rating in our Greek New Testament. But Jesus’ words in the variant are consistent with the theme of his whole life and ministry. He wants us to show our love for people just as he did. John got the message loudly and clearly and later became the Apostle of Love (e.g calling himself, “the disciple whom Jesus loved” and his emphasis on Christ’s love at work among his people both in his Gospel and all three of his Epistles). Jesus wants us to show our love for him not by judging those who reject him but by forgiving them and preaching the gospel to them.

**Luke 9:57-62**

***57As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” 58Jesus replied, “Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.” 59He said to another man, “Follow me.” But he replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” 60Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” 61Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.” 62Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”***

The three men that interact with Jesus are similar to James and John in this one way; they think they are speaking purely out of faith but they are not. They are speaking out of their carnal hearts. Or perhaps their thoughts are a mixture of faith and foolishness. Either way they do not know their own hearts as well as Jesus does. We are born, blind, dead and enemies of God. Only God can see and show what is in our hearts. Spiritual insight into one’s self was what David longed for in Psalm 19 and 25. Remember how Saul/Paul thought he was offering God service when he persecuted Christians?

It must have been huge surprise to anyone listening in on this conversation. Each of these men said things that we think would appeal to any compassionate leader. But Jesus saw deeper than the surface. He could read their hearts and secondly, he wanted to establish himself as their God and Savior. As God, he alone can occupy the “number one” place in our hearts and he wants that place all alone, with no rivals. The preacher does a disservice to the pathos in these conversations if he succumbs to the temptation to take all three separately and to exhaust all the examples of misplaced priorities or if he tries to defend Jesus’ demand to avoid one’s own father’s funeral and or his demand that we refuse to first say goodbye to our parents. We don’t want to soften Jesus’ demand by watering down the sharp edge in his responses. He meant for his words to confront the very core or these three men and the Holy Spirit (by making Luke write these passages) meant for it irritate us at the core of our hearts so that we stay tender to making Jesus “number one” for us too.

**The First Man:** He says that he will follow Jesus wherever he will go. The use of the adverb ὅπου “wherever” meaning “anywhere ever” with the futuristic subjunctive ἀπέρχῃ is complete. His promise is almost too complete for a sinner, like when Peter made his bold claims on Good Friday. Judging by Jesus’ answer the man had no idea what was in his own heart. He must have thought that leaving his present circumstances would be his biggest hardship and that it would be an easy downhill ride from there. Maybe he thought he was moving up to a higher place on earth by following Jesus except for leaving his family and old life behind. But discipleship is the cross (Matthew 16:24-28). Following Jesus is not finding a place on this earth but losing all places. Our only place is with Jesus and he has no earthly place. “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) Following Jesus means giving up the pursuit of earthly happiness as your number one passion. Instead you happily pursue God and his Son, Jesus Christ.

**The Second Man:** The second man does not approach Jesus. Instead, Jesus approaches him and tells him to follow him. Jesus’ invitation meant, “Right now, get up and follow me! This is your opportunity. There may not be another.” We are reminded of the first disciples leaving their nets immediately, (Mark 1: 16-18), and Paul’s plea to the Corinthians. ***“As God’s co-workers we urge you not to receive God’s grace in vain.2For he says, ‘In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.***” (1 Corinthians 6:1-2). But this man wants to make his father’s funeral more important that Jesus’ call to follow him immediately. It is the word πρῶτον that made Jesus reply. There is no other first in from of Jesus. Jesus wanted him to know that nothing, not even a funeral, was bigger than his call to be a “sold out” believer and proclaimer of the word that brings life to those whose time of grace is waning. The answer “let the dead bury the dead.” is stark but it is not rude. Jesus means that the father’s time of grace has ended. If people want to circle around and talk about how great a life this man lived and did not want Jesus’ love and hope, then they were spiritually dead and should not be prioritized above him and his call. Jesus is really saying nothing at all about a Christian’s funeral and the opportunity to comfort believers with the gospel or to preach the gospel to lost family members. Jews buried their dead rather quickly without embalming them. So, perhaps this man’s father had just died that day or the day before. It makes Jesus’ relentless call for immediate response even more demanding. Following Jesus means giving up all other appointments, family or otherwise, if they conflict with the appointments that Jesus has for us. The call that Jesus had for this man was a bigger call than that of a dead man. It was the call to διάγγελλε the saving kingdom of God to those whose time of grace had not yet ended. And this call always trumps all other priorities.

**The Third Man:** It seems that the third man may have heard Jesus’ words to the first two or at least his words to the second man. It sounds like he is saying, “I will follow you but my request is smaller than this man’s. I just want to say good bye. It won’t take long. Just let me do this first.” Jesus could tell that the man didn’t fully get that he was facing God’s own Son, even God himself. What man in his right mind would stand at a burning bush from where God himself was speaking and argue about when or why to “hop to” serving him. (Well, Moses, Jonah and Gideon, to name a few, but Elisha wouldn’t. He killed his 12 oxen and burned his plow.) This exchange between Jesus and the third man reminds us of a boy playing video games and putting off his mother’s request until he is done with his game - or people saying, “I will wait till I retire to serve the Lord with my whole life.” Jesus’ words καὶ βλέπων εἰς τὰ ὀπίσω are the main thought in this conversation. If God who owns your past, present and future is calling for you to leave a past and move to the future with him, you will be turned to salt (Genesis 19:26) if you look back longingly at your past. It’s not the people in this man’s family that Jesus disdains but this man’s attitude that he can put Jesus off for anything!

There are a couple of threads running through this entire text. First of all, there is the thread of human inability to recognize one’s own spiritual blindness. James and John and the three men are five examples of “would be” followers of Jesus with misguided hearts. Secondly, there is the thread of Christ’s radical love that calls us to radical unworldly devotion. And finally, there is the thread of who Christ is as the perfect loving God who has made loving us, saving us and tirelessly calling us to himself – his top priority!