
SUNDAY, JUNE 27, 2010
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
Luke 9:51-62 (Going nowhere, but making great time)

TODAY'S SERMON THEME:

When we feel discouraged and confused, it is helpful to remember that our faith as Christians gives us a purpose for being here, a destination for our spiritual journey, and instructions on how to live while we await the fulfillment of God's promises to us. Purpose. Destination. Instructions: Three things necessary for spiritual living. Our God is faithful. And He has not left us as orphans in this wacky and wonderful world.

- 1. Sometimes, when I least expect it, I find myself thinking funny thoughts about my former students -- especially the ones who had a knack for getting into trouble.** Just last week, for example, I found myself thinking about three freshmen students who decided on the spur of the moment (20 years ago) to take a road trip to the mountains of Colorado. These three young men were dorm mates, and all three were doing their absolute best to become habitual underachievers. In other words, they THOROUGHLY enjoyed their time in college -- as long as their time did NOT include going to class . . . or doing homework . . . or studying for exams . . . or living with even a modicum of self-discipline. All three partied too much, skipped class too much, overslept too much, got into trouble too much. This one particular spring break, though, they came up with their weirdest plan yet: They decided to drive 15 straight hours to the mountains on Friday, spend all day Saturday at 9,000 feet, and drive 15 hours back to campus on Sunday. **And they asked me to say a special blessing for them as they left. And so I did.** As they piled into the car, I had the following conversation with them: "What route are you taking?" I asked. They had no idea. "What specific highways will you be using?" They had no idea. "Where exactly in the mountains are you going?" No idea. "OK. What is your ultimate destination?" Again, no idea. "Well," I asked. "Do you at least have an interstate highway map?" Nope. No map. Finally, in exasperation, I asked: "Well, what if you get lost along the way?" Almost in unison, they replied: "That would be GREAT!" . . . OK. You probably know the rest of their story: They never made it to Colorado, they never made it to the mountains, they never made it out of Central Texas. In their great excitement to leave campus, they forgot to buy gas. They sputtered to a stop just outside of Lampasas, Texas.

2. It was the great Yogi Berra who once said: "You've got to be very careful if you don't know where you're going, because you might not get there." As always, Yogi makes a great point -- a point that is as much about life as it is about traveling . . . a point that my three brilliant students demonstrated so magnificently during their short-lived road trip. Here is what my students demonstrated in their "road trip to nowhere": Those who travel without a map usually wind up without a clue. Those who expect to get lost usually succeed.

Those who fail to plan, plan to fail. This is undeniably TRUE about traveling. But it is even more true in our spiritual lives. To set out each day without a spiritual PLAN for living -- a plan that includes prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading -- is even MORE foolish than forgetting to fill up the gas tank in our car.

And that brings me to the main point I want to make this morning:

When we feel discouraged and confused, it is helpful to remember that our faith as Christians gives us a purpose for being here, a destination for our spiritual journey, and instructions on how to live while we await the fulfillment of God's promises to us. Purpose. Destination. Instructions. Three things necessary for spiritual living. Our God is faithful. And He has not left us as orphans in this wacky and wonderful world.

3. Three of our four Scripture lessons this morning emphasize the spiritual aspect of our lives -- and the necessity of letting the Holy Spirit of the Lord direct and guide our lives. And even our Collect for today -- our opening prayer -- says that our UNITY as Christians comes through the activity of the Holy Spirit; and that the Holy Spirit working IN us, transforms us into a "holy temple" acceptable to our heavenly Father. OUR LIVES ARE, FIRST AND FOREMOST, SPIRITUAL LIVES. For the Spirit dwelling in us leads us into relationship with the Lord. And our relationship with the Lord is SPIRITUAL.

(1) In our Psalm for this morning (Psalm 16): We are told in explicit terms that the Lord is our good above all other, our refuge and protection. Though others follow after false gods, WE will follow the Lord -- and our hearts teach us to follow Him, night after night. We will set the Lord before us in all our ways. AND WHEN WE DO, we will not fail. For God is faithful and will not reject us. And then Psalm 16:11 says this:

חצונ:ינעידות הרא םייה עבש תוחמש תא-ךינפ תומענ דנימיב

To'di'e-niy o'rakh kha'yim-sho-va see-ma'khot et-pah-nee'kha ne-ih'mote bee'min'kha ne'tsakh.

"You will show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore." Why would we EVER chose to LEAVE our God and follow evil? God is the One who leads us into the pathway of LIGHT . . . As Jesus said in John 8:12 -- "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will NEVER walk in darkness, but will have the Light of Life." God illumines our path. God shows us the way. God leads us in His direction.

(2) In our lesson from Galatians Chapter 5: St. Paul makes a clear distinction between the spiritual life and the "fleshly" or earthly life. The spiritual life produces the nine-fold "FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT" . . . and the earthly life produces the 13-fold (or more) fruits of the flesh. Those who are LED BY THE SPIRIT are able, through the Spirit, to produce the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who walk the way of the flesh produce: Fornication, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, "and things like these." Paul implores us to let the

HOLY SPIRIT guide us in the path of the Lord. "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh." I have sent countless numbers of people to Galatians Chapter 5 to figure out for themselves what sort of "fruit" their lives are producing. You can do it for yourself. Read over the fruit of the spirit and the fruit of the flesh -- in this chapter -- and decide for yourself whether you are living a SPIRITUAL life, or an EARTHLY life. You cannot live BOTH simultaneously. St. Paul is very clear about that. The desires of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh are mutually exclusive.

(3) Finally, in our Gospel lesson from Luke Chapter 9: We approach the turning point in the Gospel narratives about the Lord Jesus. Up to this point in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus has focused His ministry on the region of Galilee, around the Sea of Galilee -- the northern part of Israel. And now, our lesson tells us at the beginning (Luke 9:51), "As the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem." The earthly pathway that our Savior chose to walk included great pain, great suffering, and death . . . which awaited Him in Jerusalem. And in following this "way of the Cross," Jesus had OUR WELFARE, OUR SALVATION, foremost in His mind. His suffering was for US. His agony was for US. His death was for US. And as if describing His own situation, Jesus responds to the crowds by saying, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God." Jesus "set His face" toward Jerusalem, and would not waver from his eternal plan.

Our lessons today point in two directions -- one toward the spiritual life, another toward the earthly (or self-centered) life. The Lord Jesus repeatedly shows us that the way of the Cross -- the way of humility, patience, charity, service to others -- is the true way of Life. And when we follow the Lord's example in serving the poor, the sick, the friendless, the needy . . . we are choosing to serve Him directly. But as we all know, the way of the flesh is very seductive and enticing.

4. Back in the 1970's, when I worked as a newspaper reporter and editor, I had a colleague who was always dabbling and experimenting with the latest psychological-spiritual-religious-mind-expanding craze. Whenever something new came along, he was the first to try it. He completely left behind the faith of his childhood -- the Christian faith -- and sought illumination elsewhere. During the time I knew him, he tried transcendental meditation, yoga, Zen, self-hypnosis, and (finally) mind-altering drugs. He became so "self-aware" -- so "self-illuminated" -- that he cheated multiple times on his wife, got divorced, lost his job, lost his house, lost his two sons, and (ultimately) lost his life. He took his own life while living in a homeless shelter. He never had a PURPOSE for his life; he never had a DESTINATION for his life; he never had spiritually healthy INSTRUCTIONS for living his life. All he had was selfishness, self-centeredness. He never where he was headed, why he was headed there, and what he could do to stop his descent into the abyss. He never knew that there was a SOLUTION for his problems. He never knew that there was a way out of his misery. He never knew.

5. Quite simply, our faith as Christians gives us purpose, destination, and instructions: Three things that are necessary for spiritual living. Our God is faithful. And He has not left us as orphans in this wacky and confusing world. No. He is with us.