

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
June 27, 2010
Luke 9:51-62

It has been over three years now since I got the e-mail, but reading today's gospel passage immediately brought it to mind. I had not seen my friend Shelby since our graduation from Virginia seminary, but our graduating class kept in touch by e-mail through a yahoo group. A mutual friend sent an e-mail to all of us which began, "Shelby's mother, Celia Ochs, died on Thursday evening, following 3 days of hospice. She was alert and as Shelby put it, 'had turned her face toward Jerusalem'." What a beautiful and faithful way to approach mortality, to see it not as losing a battle, but as turning toward a destination, in a journey that involves pain, but leads to the heavenly Jerusalem. To see it as following in the path that Jesus followed, with faith that we die with Christ and are resurrected with Christ. The next time I saw Shelby, during a clergy conference at Shrine Mont, we sat at a dining hall table as she told me more about her mother, and the lovely ways in which decades of faithful living had prepared her well for faithful dying.

It is a bittersweet feeling with which to begin today's reading, "When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem." I imagine it like a scene in a movie in which there is no dialogue, just music in a minor key, with a slow but steady rhythm, like walking forward toward a destination that seems like both a choice and an inevitability.

If Jesus' responses to people who want to follow him seem harsh, and we want to make things easier on him, or easier on ourselves, there are plenty of ways to do that. For example, when the would-be follower says "Lord, first let me go and bury my father" that sounds pretty reasonable, and we may be uncomfortable with Jesus' response: "let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Some commentators wonder whether this guy's father is not yet dead, and the son wants to stay at home until he can fulfill his final obligation to his father. Another commentator, Joel Green, offers another possibility based on two stages of burial: "The practice of primary burial (in which the corpse is placed in a sealed tomb) followed by secondary burial (following a twelve-month period of decomposition the bones were

collected and reburied in an ossuary or "bone box") is well attested, with the additional twelve months between burial and reburial providing for the completion of the work of mourning" (*The Gospel of Luke*, 408). Maybe this son wants to wait until the year is over before he follows Jesus.

But what about the son who says, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home"? Jesus tells him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." Why won't Jesus even let him say goodbye?

Alan Culpepper suggests that these demands are so harsh "that one is tempted to place these sayings in the category of Semitic hyperboles that dramatize a point but are not meant to be taken literally, such as; 'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away' (Matt 5:29)." There is a part of us that would prefer a Jesus who says, "Oh sure, if following me right now isn't convenient for you, that's fine. You go ahead and do whatever it is that you need to do. I'll wait right here for as long as it takes. I don't have anything else to do." But while that kind of "whatever" Jesus might appeal to us on one level, the real Jesus is the one who seems more compelling, the one who seems worth following.

One of the most useful things I learned about spiritual life came from parenting toddlers. Toddlers are famous for creating the maximum number of messes in the shortest amount of time, and while the adult is trying to get the first mess cleaned up, the toddler is busily making the second mess, so the housework tends to build up. Plus toddlers are not particularly well-suited to allowing spans of uninterrupted time to do things like balance the checkbook. To save parents from complete insanity, God in his mercy created naptime. And it was good.

My difficulty was that by the time my toddler's eyes finally closed, my to-do list had gotten pretty long, and I could never really predict how long it would be until I heard a little voice calling, "Mommy...Mommy!" At first, I figured I would just take care of the housework that really needed to get done, and then I could sit down for my prayer time. But that old cliché that a woman's work is never done turned out to be true, and I seldom had any time for God. After a while of that, I realized that my daily prayer time needed to be the first thing I did during my toddler's nap, or it would never happen at all. Once I got myself into the discipline of starting prayer first, it became a habit that I was

able to sustain. More important, I found that the simple act of taking time for God, and for my own faith, first, was helpful in itself, because it reminded me of what truly matters in my life. Putting first things first in my schedule enabled me to put first things first on my priority list. Putting my prayer time first seemed like a big commitment, but it was the commitment that made good things possible.

Meade has talked about much she loves the church and how much it has enriched her life. And she's also talked about the fact that all that has been possible because when she was a little girl her mother taught her both by word and example that if it's Sunday morning you go to church whether you happen to feel like it or not. A sense of commitment makes good things possible.

Many sociologists have observed that twenty-somethings are much less willing to make commitments than people of other generations, whether that involves a reluctance to commit to another person in a marriage, or even to commit to an RSVP for a social event, as well as to commit to any kind of religious organization. That's all true. Still, despite all this rejection of commitment, I notice that twenty-somethings are going out in record numbers to get tattoos. And when I see the tattoos, I have to wonder whether the desire for tattoos is partly an unacknowledged longing to commit to something permanent.

Is there a part of us that says "yes, I want to put aside all the things that seem urgent right now, and just commit myself to following this man who says these amazing things about God's grace, and who lives like these amazing things are true, regardless of the cost, and I will put aside even the good things in order to pursue the best things."

There is a passage in the Old Testament that is so beautiful that couples often ask for it to be read at their weddings, even though it is not actually about romantic love between a woman and a man. It is the passage from the Book of Ruth, in which Ruth has the option of staying behind in Moab to grieve for her dead husband and to stay with her family. That is the option her sister-in-law Orpah chooses. But Ruth chooses a different option, the option of going with Naomi, her mother-in-law, as Naomi journeys toward a future that involves pain, but also involves a great deal of faith, and love, and hope. Ruth stands in contrast to the men in today's gospel reading, who are worried about not having a place to lay their heads, about not staying to grieve for the dead, about not leaving their family behind. Ruth is also faced with going into a strange country where she will have

nowhere to lay her head, and with not staying to grieve the death of her husband, and with leaving her own family behind forever. And she says to Naomi,

“Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!

Where you go, I will go;

Where you lodge I will lodge

Your people shall be my people

And your God my God

Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried.

May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. (Ruth 1:16-19)

To commit ourselves to a life of faith does involve setting our face to go to Jerusalem, the place of crucifixion. But in the end we find it also involves setting our face to go to Bethlehem, the place of new birth.