

5th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 13/Proper 8 (C)
June 27, 2010
Text: Luke 9:51-62

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, Oregon

One of the things I've loved for years is downhill skiing. I love going fast. I love going into a turn and feeling the edges of my skis bite into the snow. I love feeling the cold air rushing by. It makes me feel fully, completely awake and alive.

It was an entirely different sort of experience learning to water ski. I thought, "I can ski. This should be easy." In fact, my sister told me, "You'll just pop right out of the water." It wasn't quite like that. I remember the first day going out on the lake. I had my ski vest on. I was all ready to go. I had a pair of double skis. I got square with the boat. I had the ski rope nice and taut, with my ski tips up. I gave the thumbs-up sign. The driver pushed the throttle down, and I could feel the pull on the rope. And then it started dragging me under the water. And when it started dragging me sideways, I knew it was time to let go.

But the second time—well, the second time was a lot like the first. And so was the third. And after being dragged under about five or six times, I had water up my nose and down my throat, and I was getting a little tired of it. And I was starting to feel a bit like a slow learner.

I wonder whether that was how James and John were feeling in our gospel story for today. Jesus had sent envoys to a Samaritan village, and the people of the village had turned them away. The people there didn't want to have anything to do with Jesus. They wouldn't even let him into their village. James and John were outraged. Maybe you recall that Jesus' little nickname for them was "sons of thunder." And here they show why it was such an appropriate nickname. They were outraged, so they said to Jesus, "Lord, do want us to command fire to come down from heaven to consume them?"

It's enough to make me wonder, where were they when Jesus said, "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you." Or where were they when Jesus said, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer them the other one as well." Or when he said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven." (Luke 6: 27-28, 29, 37)

Our gospel reading says "Jesus turned and rebuked them." I wonder if he said something like, "Will you two knock that off?! Just stop it!" And I wonder if James and John ended up feeling like slow learners. They'd been with Jesus all this time, they'd followed him from town to town, they'd listened to everything he said, but they were clearly not getting it.

There are times when I feel a little slow about catching what Jesus is up to. There are days when impatience gets the better of me, or when I feel more anxious than trusting. There are days when I can appreciate James and John's desire to command fire from heaven to consume the people that I think are making a huge mess of the world. Maybe you feel that way sometimes too.

I find great encouragement in our gospel story for today. Even though James and John miss the point, Jesus continues to call people to follow him, to enter into his way of forgiving and serving and sharing, to be part of the future that is God's gift for all of creation—a new life, a hope made full and real.

I also find great challenge in our gospel story for today, because Jesus' summons is demanding, even shocking. Jesus is met by three people who are interested in following him. And in each conversation, Jesus says something surprising and unsettling to press on us a sense of urgency about how important it is to follow, and maybe also how difficult it might be.

In the first encounter Jesus tells a person who wants to follow him that every living creature has a place to call home... except for Jesus. "Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Jesus' life is not defined by his stuff... because he doesn't have any! The gospel story doesn't tell us whether that was enough the scare this would-be follower away, or perhaps he rose to the challenge and left behind every attachment and followed Jesus. But what about us? Maybe we have a home, a mortgage, a car, and more stuff than we know what to do with. What does Jesus want from us? What is Jesus asking us to leave behind?

As I read the New Testament, it seems to me that there are a variety of faithful ways of responding to Jesus. Some are called to lives of extreme simplicity and some are not, but all are called to give generously and share freely, and maybe even sacrificially. None are called to look only to their own interests or desires. What I think is most remarkable is that Jesus doesn't set down rules, and he doesn't condemn or scold. Instead, he simply models the most amazing freedom. Because he trusts God, he is not in need. He doesn't need anything. Jesus doesn't even need this person who wants to follow—he doesn't need them to be a disciple, so Jesus is free to not pretty things up. Jesus can say, "This is what it is like to follow me. It's not the way everybody else lives."

In the second encounter, Jesus takes on devotion to family. There's a man who would follow, except first there's a family funeral to tend to. There's a harsh edge to the way Jesus dismisses family obligations. "Let the dead bury their own dead." In Jesus' time, family relationships were supremely valued. A person's whole life was defined by their family identity. But Jesus claims priority over the duties that belong to those family relationships. In truth, he claims priority over *everything* else that would claim our loyalty. How can we respond? We need to be careful. Jesus is not asking his followers to sacrifice

their children, spouses, or parents for the sake of church involvement or any other kind of service. He's calling us to shape our lives after his, and he insists that nothing—not even family—can be offered as an excuse for putting off his call to the way of forgiving and generosity and compassion.

In the third encounter, Jesus says pursuing the kingdom of God is like putting the hand to the plow and not looking back. Following Jesus' way isn't something we do for a part time hobby, turning back now and again to a life that is all about us. Belonging to Jesus doesn't happen during an hour set aside on a Sunday morning. We belong to Jesus lock, stock and barrel, wholehearted and without reservation. We don't follow Jesus when we feel like it or when it's convenient. Jesus wants us to live in the reign of God, to know the joy and freedom that is his—this hour and every hour.

We all have many identities and loyalties—we're a parent, a child, a worker, a student; we're liberal or conservative. Jesus wants us to grow up into our true identity as children of God—this hour and every hour. Jesus wants us to not be torn between competing visions for life, and instead find our hearts and souls made whole and complete by following Jesus in his way of compassion and love, forgiveness and service and generosity—this hour and every hour, through all of this life, and into the life to come.

Oh, about learning to water ski—I did finally get it. I remember one afternoon. It was a perfect day to be on the lake. The wind was still, and the water was so calm that it was like skiing on glass. I felt this ear-to-ear smile spread across my face—it was pure joy. And this is my prayer for each and every one of us. I pray that as we let Jesus' values become our values, as we learn his way of forgiveness and peace, that more and more we would feel the pure joy of it, that we would know in our bones that this life with God is our best and truest life. Hear our prayer, O Lord! Amen