

**A Sermon Preached
at
St. George's Madrid
by
The Reverend Canon John W. Kilgore, M.D.
30 June 2019
III Trinity
Proper 8 Year C RCL
2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14
Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62**

No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.

Jesus is tough! He doesn't mince any words... James and John wanted to call down fire on an inhospitable Samaritan village and Jesus rebuked them. And then he calls those along the road to follow him. They want, naturally, to put their affairs in order before leaving, to take care of family matters, such as burying one's father, and Jesus says, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' And another wants to just go and say goodbye to those at home and Jesus says, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Pretty harsh. It is said that it is not an easy gospel; but the rewards are great.

We have two great stories today: the Old Testament story of Elijah and Elisha, and the gospel story of Jesus saying 'let the dead bury their own dead.' I love the story about Elijah being taken up into heaven in a whirlwind and Elijah asking Elisha beforehand, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." And Elisha only requests that he have 'a double share' of Elijah's spirit. And it was granted to him. It reminds me of when King Solomon was anointed, he prayed for, not riches or success or victories, but rather for wisdom. A higher cause.

These two stories are about discipleship; about our call to follow. In the story of Elijah and Elisha from 2 Kings the mantle of prophet, herald of God, is being passed, figuratively and literally in this case. In the gospel story Jesus is on the road calling people — Come follow me. And telling them to do it now. It is full commitment.

There is a story about the chicken and the pig in the barnyard talking one morning. The chicken says to the pig. 'Hey! Why don't we offer breakfast for the farmer and his family this morning? They do so much good for us, feeding and all.' The pig cheerfully responded, 'Great! What will we give them?' The chicken replied, 'I'll supply the eggs and you supply the meat.' The pig's countenance dropped as he realized the ramifications of what he had agreed to. He sadly replied to the hen: 'For you that's devotion, an offering, but for me it means total sacrifice.' And he walked away. Jesus is asking us for full commitment.

Last week I asked the questions, 'Why are you here?' and 'Why do you come to St. George's?' I don't know why you are individually here. No one offered an answer to me on their way out

the door last week. Perhaps you were still considering the answer. Or perhaps you thought it was just a rhetorical question. But it wasn't. It was a very serious question. Why are you here? What draws you to church? Why are we here? Any of us? All of us?

David Brooks, a longtime columnist with the New York Times is one of the wise sages of our age. He thinks big and broadly, and considers large social topics, often with a very wise and encompassing perspective. He is very erudite. A couple of years ago he wrote a piece titled 'How to Leave a Mark on People.' It is a great treatise on making a difference, affecting the world. In it he talks about some organizations being thick, and some being thin. 'Some organizations,' he relates, 'leave a mark on you, and some you pass through with scarcely a memory.' He talks about colleges that are all the same versus ones that stand out, or organizations that are notable and models, that make a difference — the US Marines, Greenpeace, and Doctors without Borders might be examples. In mentioning his activities in the world he recounts that he has only been involved in four or five **thick** institutions in his life.

He writes, "A **thick** institution is not one that people use instrumentally, to get a degree or to earn a salary. A thick institution becomes part of a person's identity and engages the whole person: head, hands, heart, and soul. So thick institutions have a physical location, often cramped, where members meet face to face on a regular basis, like a dinner table or a packed gym or assembly hall. [Or, a church...] Such institutions have a set of collective rituals — fasting or reciting or standing in formation. They have shared tasks, which often involve members closely watching one another, the way hockey teammates have to observe everybody else on the ice." He goes on to say that, "...such organizations often tell and retell a sacred story about themselves...they have a common ideal — encapsulated, for example in the *Semper Fi* motto of the Marines." He also mentions two researchers at the University of Virginia who look at thick and thin moral frameworks and relates that they write that thin organizations look to take advantage of people's strengths and treat people as resources to be marshaled. Thick organizations think in terms of virtue and vice. They take advantage of people's desire to do good and arouse their higher longings.

I would like to suggest that the Church is indeed a thick organization. And that we have a thick moral framework in what Jesus tells us, calls us to, a not-easy gospel, one that it is 'tough,' with no minced words. 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.' Elisha asked for a 'double share' of Elijah's spirit. Full commitment.

So why are you here? Why is St. George's here? And what is ahead for us? Your interregnum, time between permanent priests, is well underway and the search process for a new priest proceeds apace. Now is the time for serious consideration of what kind of disciples we are here. How much we give of ourselves, our time, talent and treasure. And what the nature and tenor of St. George's is and is to be. One writer has written, 'Commitment to follow Jesus means sharing in his sacrifice and looking ahead with single-minded resolve to the future kingdom of God — not back to the past. If you have your hand on the plow, to continue the analogy, you can't plow straight furrows if you are looking backward. We are just going into July and August, with many people away, and fewer activities and services. But we will start back up in September. At that time, your leadership and I will be outlining some new ways to serve and help at St. George's — work such as altar guild, acolytes, servers, lectors, and refreshment of ongoing works, like sides persons, chalice bearers, etc. I urge your consideration of your contribution to St. George's, your time, talent, and treasure over this summer downtime. So come back refreshed and ready to venture into the next chapter of St. George's history.

I want to close with a story about discipleship and service. There was a wealthy woman who died and went to heaven. When she arrived at the pearly gates, St. Peter greeted her, welcomed her, and put her in the charge of a lovely angel who was to help her settle in. The angel said, 'I am going to escort you to your new home here in heaven.' She and the angel began walking and passed through some very nice neighborhoods with lovely mansions, plazas, gardens, etc. They continued walking through other neighborhoods that were less elaborate. As they were getting to the outskirts of town, the angel stopped in front of a small and quite modest house and said, 'Here we are ma'am, this is your house in heaven.' The woman said, 'Oh no, there must be some mistake. I certainly couldn't live in a house like that.' The angel replied, 'I'm sorry but that is all we can offer with what you have sent ahead.'

What are you going to send ahead? How will you leave a mark on people? And what will you do to help make St. George's a thick institution rather than a thin one? Elisha asked for a double share of spirit, and Jesus says, 'Follow me!...and go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Let's plow looking forward.

Amen.