

Sermon
Proper 8, Year C
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by the Rev. Norman Bray

What would it mean to you if I said to you that I think that you have been called by God to fill a particular role in bringing about the Kingdom of God? You might think that perhaps I am not quite right in the head, and you might be right but let's ignore that possibility for now. Would you believe that you have been called? Or would you find an excuse to put off responding, maybe to straighten up your personal affairs before you go to do what you have been called to do? Would you ignore the call completely, just act as if it never happened? Is it possible to ignore a true call from God? Is that how we would get out of responding, by claiming that if it was from God then we could not resist?

Today we heard the call of Elisha to be the successor to Elijah as the Prophet of the Lord for Israel and there was no hesitation in Elisha. Granted, there was no doubt about this call. When Elijah threw his cloak over the shoulders of Elisha everyone knew what that meant, he was named as the next prophet to Israel and Elisha wanted to run home and tell mom and dad what a wonderful thing had happened to him. But evidently that is not the way that this kind of call works because Elijah was not having any of that, it was either come now or let

it go, and so Elisha responds by killing his yoke of oxen and then breaking up the yoke and all of the gear to use in cooking the meat. He threw a going away party right there in the field and he made sure that he could not turn back by killing his animals and burning his equipment. Now that is what I call demonstrating your commitment.

In today's Gospel, Jesus was looking for that level of commitment as well but it did not sound like he was having any luck. We hear some of the hardest sayings of all the Gospels in today's reading. "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God" "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." When I say that these are hard sayings, I don't mean that they are difficult to understand. I think that Jesus is very direct and clear in what He is saying to us. The Hard part is in hearing what is being said, in hearing that what we have all claimed, that is, that we are all Disciples of Christ and this is part of the nature of discipleship. True discipleship is right now! It is in front of us, not behind us and we cannot be concerned with those who are spiritually dead. Now, all of that makes me uncomfortable, I don't know how it affects you, but if this is the measure of true discipleship then I fall woefully short, and then I feel bad about

myself and then I look for something that I can succeed at, something that I can be sure of, so that I can feel good about myself. The problem is that I have a need to feel sure about what I am doing, uncertainty is very uncomfortable, and what Jesus has called us to does not have that feel of certainty about it. In fact, to truly be a disciple of Christ we must learn how to live in what we call a “liminal space.” That is, someplace that is neither here nor there, or perhaps, neither right nor wrong. It is that gray area where we can't be exactly sure of ourselves or what is to happen to us or how we will be able to live. Liminal space is the threshold between light and dark and that is the space where we are open to spiritual growth, to true relationship with Jesus, where we are most in the Kingdom of God.

Very few of us have been trained to live in that “liminal space” because to do that means that we have to live with ambiguity, how to live with a little anxiety. It is uncomfortable and it can make the people around you uncomfortable as well because we all want to know things. We want to know that we are right to support the death penalty or that we are right to oppose the death penalty. We put bumper stickers on our cars because we know that we are right to oppose or support abortion or to oppose or support the war in Iraq. Think about it for just a minute, can you remember a time when you were not sure of how you felt about a topic like these? Do

you remember how uneasy you felt before you knew what you should think? That was a liminal moment and that is where I am trying to lead you right now. I am trying to lead you away from knowing what God's will is and toward maybe suspecting what God's will might be. Do you think that that sounds strange, that I would not want you to know what God would have you do in a given circumstance? It sounds strange, I know but just look at what happened to two of the apostles that were closest to Jesus. Look at James and John in today's Gospel. They knew that the Samaritan village deserved to be punished, those people refused to provide hospitality to the group that was headed toward Jerusalem. In the ancient Near East there were few things more universal, more basic, than the requirement to provide food and a place to rest for travelers. Those people, those Samaritans, (Samaritans always get a bad rap in the Gospels, you know), those Samaritans were worse than rude and James and John, Boanerges, the Sons of Thunder, they knew, they knew, just what kind of punishment that Jesus would want to visit on that village. They were ready to call down fire from heaven to punish those evil Samaritans; they knew what those people deserved. And they were wrong. They were wrong even though they had followed Jesus for over a year, listening to him every day, having conversations with Jesus every day, and still they could not know the mind of Jesus. We cannot know what part any person or group of persons play in the bringing

about of the Kingdom of God, God uses whomever God chooses to use in ways that we can never imagine. We have had two thousand years to study and interpret the scriptures and have we come any closer to being able to say that we truly know the mind of Jesus the Christ? There are some people who would say that they do, they know exactly what God wants us to do and how God wants us to live and what the Bible means and there are even some who will be happy to tell you how God wants you to vote! I am not one of those people. I will never tell you what the Scriptures mean, I may tell you what I think might be going on in a given piece of Scripture. I may tell you how Scripture is speaking to me but I will never tell you what Scripture is saying to you. And I promise that I will never tell you how to vote, probably.

Where does that leave us then, if we cannot KNOW what the gospel means, does that leave us adrift, without that bedrock of our faith, without the Bible? Never, never would I ever say that. We continue to struggle with God's word because that is how we learn, how we get a glimmer of what it is that we are supposed to be doing in this world. In today's epistle from Galatians, Paul gives us the key to how we can be able to live in this uncertainty, in this liminal space that I talked about. Paul says "love your neighbor as yourself", not exactly new, is it? We've heard that before, Jesus named it as a part of the Summary of the Law, but Paul takes it

farther. Paul says “through love, become slaves to one another and live by the Spirit.” I think that this is the key to being able to begin to work out what God would have us do, how God would have us live, how God would have us make decisions, how God would have us give, how God would have us treat every person on this planet, with such love that we become slaves to one another. It is ironic that something that sounds so simple is so incredibly difficult to do but if we can do as Paul says and actually “live by the Spirit” then we truly will enjoy what Paul calls the “fruit of the Spirit”, that is love, and that love will yield joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I suspect that those are attributes that I want in my life. I suspect that those are attributes that God wants in my life, and I suspect that this is the kind of commitment that Jesus was looking for in today’s Gospel. What do you think?