

I'm going to skip over Paul's letter detailing what we should and shouldn't be doing. In part, because of time and in part...we know what we should and shouldn't be doing. However, as a reminder; if we only practiced those fleshly don'ts mentioned in Paul's letter, we are in deep doo-doo. Outside of sorcery, I hope! We in this Nave have ALL practiced at least one of those things. I'm guilty of having quarrels several times a day with fellow motorists, to which my family and Angie, on most Sundays, taking her home can attest. I'm not sure if we should focus on the fruits of the spirit. Maybe we should continue to focus on being the roots. When we spend time in prayer, in worship and in hearing God's word, we develop the roots of deep faith, which ultimately blooms into living out the fruits of God's work in our lives.

In today's gospel, Jesus sets out on his final journey to Jerusalem. He has hinted to his disciples for years of his impending suffering there and even though they profess that he is their Messiah and Peter, James and John even see him transfigured with Moses and Elijah, they cannot grasp the horror of his last days. But he knows. He has set his face toward that suffering, meaning he has unwavering determination. The first episode of this journey occurs in Samaria. Jesus chose a route through Samaria which may be surprising. To say that Jews and Samaritans didn't like each other is an understatement. After Israel fell to the Assyrians, they began to intermarry with the Assyrians which was against Jewish law. The Jewish ruler, John Hyrcanus destroyed the Samaritan Temple around 128 BC because he saw it as an unholy rival to the true temple in Jerusalem. It's a sure-fire way to get a group of people to really hate you...just destroy their house of worship. The hatred between the two resulted in Jews avoiding travel through Samaria, instead, they went the long way around the entire country. Then, like now, some places were just not safe to go, sort of like an unofficial travel advisory. But then again, this shouldn't surprise us that he takes the direct route. He is, after all, Jesus!

He sends messengers ahead of him to the first village, but the group was not well received because his face was set toward Jerusalem. They didn't reject his being there because he was Jewish, they rejected him because he was on his way to that hated city. This rejection infuriated James and John whom Jesus nicknamed "Sons of Thunder" because of their fierce loyalty. These same two that asked Jesus who would be at his right hand in the kingdom, now have veins all popping out, eyes bulging, and wants to know if they should reign down fire and smite the Samaritans. This is some first century, middle eastern road rage. Sometimes we gotta ask ourselves, where did these guys come from? They asked the Prince of Peace, the healer of the diseased, the lover of the downtrodden, of lepers, of women, and all other manner of outcasts, if they could kill all the Samaritans! Jesus doesn't just say get a grip. He rebukes them. This is the same term used when he addresses demons! Did he see something demonic about calling down fire to wreak vengeance on people who weren't hospitable?

The way of discipleship, the way of being a follower of Christ is not to be the way of hatred and revenge. Traveling with Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem, the disciples do learn a deep truth about the Christian life. No more hate. No more retaliation. No more fire from heaven. Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies, to do good to those who hate them, to pray for those who mistreat him. In fact, Jesus had taught James and John these very lessons in the Sermon on the Plain before they had begun their journey through Samaria. But, here they are! We know there is a big difference between understanding the words and living the truth of the words. The disciples learn the hard truth of loving their enemy. Jesus was on his way to die to save people, not to destroy them.

He is approached by three would-be followers. The first on the road said he would follow Jesus. To which he answered, “foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.” He was letting him know that even animals had permanent homes in which to live. Following him was not easy, it was a hard life with no place to call home. How many of us have made commitments and not followed through? Either on purpose because it’s too hard, or by accident because it wasn’t important enough to be remembered? The second time he’s approached, he’s the one who tells the man “follow me”. This man had just lost his father and had to bury him. It’s a reasonable request, to bury a family member to comply with the law and the commandment to love your parents. Jesus, however, tells him to let the dead bury the dead. How is this possible? Some scholars treat this as a metaphorical pun. Let the spiritually dead take care of the physically dead. As for you, come with me.

The third person wants to follow, but needs to go home and tell his family, and say goodbye. This isn’t outlandish. After all, what would happen if one of us suddenly disappeared? We would be all over social media. Our faces would be on posters, our story may be played out on Dateline as a mysterious vanishing; we may even organize a tribute to a missing person, assuming that person has died. Elisha was permitted to say goodbye to his family by Elijah. Jesus didn’t permit it. Come now, or not at all.

Jesus isn’t just taking a walk in the country. He is resolutely walking to the cross. He has a lot to do and not much time to do it. He wasn’t going to let anything or anyone stand in the way. He was telling everyone that because of their excuses they weren’t fit to be his disciples. He’s not against burying the dead nor is he anti-family. He was speaking to those wanna be followers of his own experience. He too, was serving God, of which he made top priority. He left his parents, family and friends and hometown. He had already counted the cost. He wasn’t asking anyone to do anything he hadn’t already done.

Every journey is a quest and this is what we find Jesus on in today’s gospel. Other journeys, from King Arthur in search of the Holy Grail to Don Quixote in search of Lady Dulcinaya to Dorothy or E.T. just wanting to find their way back home, are all

on a quest. And of course, our own lives, from birth to death, is a journey. Every time we set on another journey, we are faced with trials and tribulations. The trials may be dragons, knights, flying monkeys or spaceships. But they all have beginnings and endings. Jesus was on a journey from the life he knew in Galilee to the death he will experience in Jerusalem. It is a story in which he was transformed from a prophet into the crucified Messiah. His disciples will be transformed into apostles. His followers will be transformed into disciples.

Every journey is a quest. My spiritual journey began in earnest in 1986 when I stepped in this church with my daughter who was asking questions I didn't have answers for and my marriage was in one of those valleys, and decided to try this Pizza Hut looking church that I drove past every day for 6 years. Of course walking in and seeing there was nowhere to hide, I wanted to leave, but no. Mandy went to the middle of the front row, so if people sat on either end, I was trapped. Fr. Moore was the priest, with penetrating, yet gentle eyes and as he walked around the altar during his sermon, he stopped in front of each section and looked at specific people, I prayed....oh please don't stop and look at me, oh please don't stop and look at me. Well....you know exactly what he did. And as I listened to him, I felt as if his message was absolutely directed at me. How could he possibly know that what he was speaking of, is what I was struggling with? Everything that happened from that Sunday forward has been full of nudges, trials and tribulations. Lilyan Curtis was one of the matriarchs here and a woman of whom I had much respect. A few months after I started, she suggested I run for the secretary of ECW. ME!! I was so humbled and honored. I soon learned that no one wanted to be secretary and I ended up doing it for 30 years. It apparently was written in stone. Nothing in my experience in life prepared me for taking on the nudges, from reading the lessons to altar guild to Vestry to all the outreach ministries.

To say this church and journey has been a huge part of my life is an understatement. To say the friendships and support the people of this church has given me as I had struggles in a variety of valleys, is a gross understatement. My last journey was started by Fr. Brian when he asked when I would be going to seminary. Do you know how long it took for me to pick up my jaw from the floor?? The question was asked again by Kathleen, parishioners, people in different faith traditions and even Retired bishop Alan. They all felt they heard my call. So I prayed...a lot... and never heard the call myself, but I thought, if all these other people, of whom I had utmost respect felt it, who was I to question it. So, I went through the psychological testing, thinking, surely SOMEONE will find out that this was not the way to go. I gathered a discernment team and met with the Commission on Ministry and 6 months later, got the ok to begin on-line classes at Wartburg Seminary since full-time, in person residence was out of the question.

I enjoyed the classes and did well, but still, I did not hear the call and was becoming increasingly anxious about that. There came a time when I took a year off,

first, due to the seminary had taken me as far as they could as it was Lutheran based and I had to focus on my health, having surgeries and recoveries. The next phase was studying under Kathleen. I prayed to listen to the call, but couldn't/wouldn't/didn't hear it. I made a list of pros and cons of continuing the study to become a priest. There were more cons than pros, but the defining moment was when I asked myself, if someone told me I no longer could go into the jail and minister to the ladies, I would be devastated. But if someone told me I wasn't allowed to become a priest? I was....meh! It didn't bother me a bit and it really should have. It should have been the other way around. I met with Kathleen and they both understood, but I felt really guilty. I felt I wasted people's support and trust that I would finish this journey. Even Judith at the retreat last August took me aside and said, "you know...I talked to Alan and he said it wasn't too late to resume your studies.." One would think that at a charismatic retreat weekend, I would hear SOME sort of call. But a friend told me I had finished my journey. And that was it. There was some reason why I was on it, the reason is just unknown.

It's easy to say we will follow Christ, but hard to do. It was hard to do on that road and it's hard to do now. But we are called to follow a Lord who didn't call down fire on those who weren't welcoming. We are called to follow a teacher who told us to bless those who curse us and to pray for those who want to do us harm. We are called to follow Christ on his way to Jerusalem, on the way to the cross, where, hanging from that cross, didn't curse those who put him there. He prayed for them. The Christian life is a journey. It's a journey in which we discover our deepest and truest lives, the truth of who we are called to be and how we are to live together in this messed up world. Those disciples with him on the road to Jerusalem learned that they must die to the old ways of anger and hatred, and rise to the new life of forgiveness and love. This may not have seemed like a realistic way for first-century Jews, traveling through Samaria. It may not seem like a realistic way to live in our present-day world either. And yet, it's our only realistic hope for the future.