

“... But....”

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Scripture: Luke 9:51-62 (NRSV)

Imagine this scene.....

⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.”

⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Sermon: “... But....”

Did you notice how many “buts” are in this text? Now – for literal translations I checked out a resource that translates Greek to English, which indicates “but” as “on the other hand.” To me it is still “but.” Either way, the meaning is something to block, to stop, to prevent, prevent buy in, commitment, acceptance.

How many times in our lives have we either used or been told “but” so that we do not follow through... How many times in living into our faith have we said, used, been told “but.”

Today’s Gospel reading puts all we do and why we do into question. It allows us to perceive the possible walls we put in place to keep us from doing and going where we want to go, where we should go.

Yet the value of a faith community when confronted internally and or externally is realized in what I share with you this morning on a pretty personal level, because a portion of what I share with all of you I shared field ed church more than 5 years ago, and with my home church a few years ago – with each offering unique to the congregation, and both of those sermons were rooted in scripture from the Gospel of Matthew. May what I share be a symbol of the beautiful ways in which the Bible is a tapestry of wisdom, experience and faith created

by the threads of each story weaved together to create *The Story*, the Bible, just as life is a tapestry and how each of our stories and all of our stories are threads in the fabric of life.

Today's Gospel reading invites us to accept the possibility of radical change in our lives. For some this may seem impossible, for all it can be terrifying. We often talk about our lives of faith as a journey. Journey is far too mild a term. To seek a life in Christ and with God is not a journey, but a quest. Gandalf, in JR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, says it best: "A quest is a response to a compelling call. It is a journey that is risky, uncomfortable, and sometimes simply dreadful. But it is also full of unexpected joy."

I have learned from personal experience how true this is.

Fifteen years ago I never would have imagined that I would be standing before you in the role of pastor and with scripture sharing my life, my time, and my faith.

In the fall of 2001 I responded to what I believe was a call from God. Little did I know what answering and living this call meant. (I hadn't read the Bible, and even if I had, I still would have been clueless.) It shook my world and in the aftershocks I, in 2004, let go the comfort of the familiarity of space, pay and benefits that come with 15 years of employment in one place.

In 2008, I began my weekly commute to a seminary outside of Boston, letting go the one and two lane roads I was so familiar with to tackle I95 and tractor trailers. This letting go has caused a personal transition, separating, at times, me from my family. While difficult, this is not to say it is bad. Again, "it is a journey that is risky, uncomfortable, and sometimes simply dreadful. But it is also full of unexpected joy."

I want to be clear that I am not saying that all of you should up and quit your job, or go to seminary. Far be it for me to imply or suggest that any of you do any of these things. And let me qualify my story by adding that the people in my life I knew as colleagues in my former professional life, my fellow seminary students, my home community, my field ed church community, my home church community, you, and my family keep me going.

You keep me faithful. Were it not for your support and their support in every possible way, I would be lost and broken.

It has not been and is not easy. It has been difficult with moments of pain and despair. But I lean on the stories of the disciples after they are called. They questioned, they doubted, they feared, they denied. So many added "but" to their enthusiasm to follow Jesus. Even Jesus recognized that there are "buts" to following him. A recognition that he has no place to lay his head – no home, lots of discomfort – so to follow Jesus, to live your faith will lead to challenges and for some life-changing situations.

I do not share my story to share my story. I share my story because I believe that what this passage, along with others including the Gospel of Matthew, and particularly when Jesus calls the disciples – what these stories reveal is so profound and so enormous that without a

modern day illustration it is too easy to give it back to history; appreciating the sacrifice of those who came before us but failing to correlate it to our lives today.

To let go of those things by which we have been known to ourselves and to others is no simple matter.

Consider the questions we usually ask or are asked when we meet someone new: What do you do, where are you from, who do you know (who is your spouse or partner, your child, your parents?). The answers to these inquiries are our primary identifiers. What we do, where we live, our families, for most of us, identify who we are.

Or so we think.

They identify us in the realm of human made constructs. They do not identify who we are in the eyes of God and in the light of Jesus. Jesus invites who we are as children, as creations of God, to follow him. He does not invite the Pharisees and the scribes, the ones who claim to know God; he invites those wanting to be in relationship with God.

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Honest relationship requires that we let go of those things that hide our true selves, our essence; the life and light within. When we reveal that light to ourselves, when our light shines we cannot help but to know God – not in an intellectual way – **but** in a way that transforms us into new people, a new creation. We cannot help **but** know that God is in us and with us.

Jesus did not call the disciples for his own benefit or solely for their personal salvation. Jesus called the disciples to care for the widow and the orphan; to eat with the sinners; heal the sick; free the oppressed. Jesus calls us to do the same.

BUT.... Jesus knew It is a calling that is not possible if we cannot, will not or do not recognize others as a creation and child of God with a light that shines ~ no matter how threatened that light may be to being snuffed out by our human constructs of identity.

But - We need to be able and willing and wanting to let go of the manmade borders of land and opportunity, open and honest to see the fathers and husbands, mothers and sisters, children and grandchildren dying in the desert so that we will change.

But – we must be able to let go the appearance, the smell, the awkwardness for us of a homeless person so that we will see the disease and dis-ease, the loneliness, and the fear.

But - to let go our own pride and fear we will have the ability to love our enemies.

But - We need to let go those identities that inhibit our compassion, for then we will answer the call to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We need to let go the crutch, a safety net of self in the limits in caring for ourselves, for one another, for all of life, in the idea, in the limit the word, the idea “but” instills.

So I offer, as we move forward as individuals, as a community of faith, as First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ, that as we let go of “but,” we:

Let go of expectations, and hold on to ‘let go, let God’

Let go of self-imposed boundaries, and hold on to serving one another in love.

Let go of self, and hold on to community.

Let go of fear, and hold on in faith, hope, and love.

Amen.