

June 30, 2013

2 Kings 2:1-2; 6-14, Luke 9:51-62

Keep On Keeping On

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When I read both of the readings for today I recalled a phrase from back in the 60's. It may have come out of the Civil Rights Movement because it expresses a determination to keep going despite the seeming impossibility of arriving at the goal "Keep on keeping on" is a succinct summary of both of the scriptures. There is an urgency that I hear from the words of the readings that I associate with a stubborn willingness to keep moving ahead; to keep on keeping on. Urgency is not a normal state in most of our lives. This state can be as simple as when Neil and I were on our way out of town and got stuck in the TSA line at the airport. Well actually I got stuck because of my titanium knee that required a pat down. Neil had sailed through and was pacing as we heard the announcement "Passengers Carr, please come immediately to the gate." "That's my plane," I screamed, deafening the TSA person who began to help us hustle through. Grabbing everything, we ran and made it just as the doors were beginning to close. What a feeling, especially when every passenger on the plane stared at the two of us as we skulked to our seats. But there are other moments when urgency is the emotional and physical driving force that almost sucks the air out of you. Getting that terrible nighttime phone call about a loved one in an accident and the panicked drive to the hospital that is hours away is as close to physical pain as any life experience, or was so to me. I am sure that everyone here has had urgent or URGENT experiences that are never entirely forgotten so you know what I mean.

The sense of urgency is somewhat similar in each passage. Elijah knows that his time is drawing to a close and is led by God to call Elisha who ceases plowing, kills and sacrifices the oxen and immediately walks off to follow Elijah to the Jordan River where Elijah will be taken up in a chariot. Jesus, with no previous indication of necessity and taking his followers by surprise, suddenly turns his face south toward the journey he must take to confront his destiny in Jerusalem. Moreover, ends and new beginnings are woven into the drama of each passage as they often are in our experiences. How many sudden calls have summoned loved ones to the bedside of a beloved one in the last hours of life? And how many calls have announced the start of labor and the urgent rush to be present at the beginning of a new life? Thus urgent has many connotations as well as joyful, painful or challenging resolutions.

But the common theme of urgency in these passages is surrounded by other troubling challenges to faithfulness that disturb our understanding of the meaning of discipleship. In Luke, Potential followers of Jesus come to him willing to follow but first, one needs to bury his father and another to say goodbye to his family. Luke makes it clear that Jesus has no sympathy for those I have decided to call, 'but firsters,' pronouncing, "No one who looks back after putting his hand to the plow is fit for the realm of God." Unlike the 'but firsters,' Elisha intuits that there is no time for him to bring the oxen back to his father; rather, he offers them as a sacrifice of gratitude to God for calling him to be the inheritor of the great prophet. With no question, he follows Elijah to both of their destinies.

Keeping urgency as the theme, we need to examine the virtually impossible to understand response of Jesus to those who would follow. For that we go back to chapter 8. Jesus had been teaching enormous crowds from all over Galilee. Into the crowd came his mother and his brothers wanting to have a conversation with him. The last time that Jesus

had been with his family was in Nazareth where he preached in the synagogue and was almost stoned. After that experience, he probably did not have warm fuzzy feelings for his family and it is unclear in Luke's Gospel why they came. Jesus was certainly achieving a great deal of success in his teaching as witnessed by the crowds. Did curiosity bring his family or was it a need to seek forgiveness for their abandonment of Jesus in Nazareth? We can't know. What Luke describes in this situation is as challenging as what he declares to the would-be followers of chapter 9. Folks in the crowd may have recognized Jesus' family and passed on the news that they were present. When the news finally reached Jesus, the crowd was fully aware and prepared to clear a path for the family. But, Jesus surprisingly said, "My mother and my brothers are those who listen to God's teaching and do what it says. Despite the words, I do not believe that Jesus was rejecting his family; rather, he was extending the meaning of family to include every single person who then and now live lives of faithfulness.

Luke's Gospel was written about 100 years after Christ taught those crowds in Galilee. The teachings of Christ in Luke were both comfort and strong challenge to those in the Roman Empire who would be followers. Within the Jewish communities scattered throughout the Empire, the Jesus movement was no longer viewed as a sect where worshippers continued to observe the rituals and traditions of Judaism. Those who chose Christianity were denounced as apostates, cut off from their families and considered to be dead. Gentiles who chose Christianity were scorned for turning from the sophistication of Rome and Rome's gods in favor of a cult whose founder had been crucified and whose followers included the poor, slaves and women in positions of authority. To continue within their birth families or communities as observant Jews or as tradition bound Romans was impossible for those who became Christians. Having made the break with the past, new believers found a new family and a new understanding of human community that encompassed all people; women and men, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles. This is the legacy that the early Christian community passed on to us.

We have come far from that fragile community of the First Century, but we are not so different. Confronted with distrust, persecution and profound theological arguments, there was an urgency about their struggle to survive as they laid the foundation upon which we stand in the 21st Century. In our turn, we struggle with our own urgency. Our Western culture is increasingly secular. There are chasms of difference across the Christian world leading to intolerance and mutual recrimination over all those beliefs that divide rather than unite: abortion, equal marriage, Gay and Lesbian clergy come to mind. That same intolerance is exhibited in disregard for all non-Christians and disrespect for their beliefs and rituals. I might also add that to the secular world all believers are an anachronism.

So, urgency, yes! We have something to say, to contribute to the good of the community, we who are believers. What we say and what we do might drive a wedge into our relationships with family and friends over those theological differences. I am fairly certain that when Elisha's father discovered the unplowed field and the oxen carcasses, it may have negatively affected his relationship with his son. I empathize with the 'but firsters' who were rejected because of family demands that were built into the culture, and I am reasonably certain that the brothers of Jesus were angry and humiliated that they were shunted aside, but those brothers eventually accepted the reality of Jesus' message. Indeed, James, one of the brothers became the leader of the Jerusalem Church.

The eminent Scripture Scholar, and one of our own UCC clergy, Walter Brueggemann challenges both clergy and congregation to look at our world as it is, not how we wish it could be, and to respond with thoughtful urgency. He says that, inspired by George Carlin who came up with a list of seven words that cannot be said on television, he came up with a list of topics that cannot be spoken from the pulpit. Among his list are these:

“Some could not say that the war is stupid, and we are expending our precious young on the folly of the National Security State.”

Some could not say that present day capitalism has failed in its excessive greed that devours the poor and now reaches into the middle class.”

“Some cannot say that the immigrants are indeed sisters and brothers who come under the welcome sign.”

“Some cannot say that our penchant for violence is toxic for the heart of our common life.”

“Some cannot say that the experiment in greedy entitlement has failed, and we will have to find other ways to maintain our hummers.” (Journal for Preachers, Pentecost, 2013)

You may disagree with some or all of Brueggemann’s choices for what not to say in a sermon, but I believe that all of those points are indicators of how far we are from God’s reality. So now I invite you to share your own sense of urgency over what bothers or frightens or angers you. Where do you want the presence and voice of Christian witness to be seen and heard? Where is the cloak of Elijah today? Where is the teaching of Jesus needed today?

We are the spiritual descendants of those who followed Christ to Jerusalem and spiritual descendants of those who left all that was familiar and comfortable that they might become a part of a gathered community of love and care for all. We too, are called each day to keep on keeping on, following Christ to the destiny that embraces all humankind in peace and trust. Amen.