

Luke 9:51-62 - When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When 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?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And 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." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21 - Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place....So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." Then Elijah said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Starting: First Steps

It's summer, and I'm looking for some good beach reading right now. On my nightstand I've started a pile of books that I want to delve into during vacation. One of our members writes mysteries, and the sleuth is a minster's wife. Bingo -- add those to the pile! Because I'm a nerd, and love history, I've added a few books about this place, King's Chapel, and its past.

But what I do not have on my summer reading list are books that sound like today's reading from Luke. That passage, read for us by Carol, is not what I would pick for this perfect summer Sunday, the last day of June. It's definitely not summer beach reading.

What Luke gives us today is like the huge yellow sticker affixed to used cars in Massachusetts: a Lemon Law warning. It's a buyer-beware statement for any who would consider following this man, Jesus of Nazareth. It's a truth in advertising alert: if you get involved with this guy, don't expect easy street.

Compared to Luke, the Old Testament reading today is a walk in the park. There the grand old prophet Elijah is identifying his successor, someone with a name uncannily similar to his, Elisha. When Elijah chooses Elisha, by Elijah tossing his mantle – his cloak – over the shoulders of Elisha, Elisha stops the plowing he's doing, and makes a reasonable request: let me say goodbye to my family before I set off with you to be a prophet. Elijah must think this is fine, because the next we know, the neophyte Elisha dismantles his wooden plow to create kindling for a fire, butchers the oxen that have been pulling the plow, and makes the greatest goodbye barbecue imaginable for himself and his family. Today we offer cake – not barbecue – for Heinrich's sendoff, but you get the idea – Elisha gets a goodbye party before he departs. As it should be.

But in the New Testament story in Luke, when folks there have the *temerity* to ask Jesus if they can say farewell to those at home before they take off as fledging disciples, Jesus refuses! No, Jesus declares, if you want to come with me, it's now or never.

Another would-be follower seeks to follow Jewish law and bury his parents, but Jesus again rejects him. "Let me dead bury the dead." What? And if that were not daunting enough, Jesus tells a third, "foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." You will have no home, if you plan to journey with me, Jesus is declaring.

Imagine me replacing my welcome here to newcomers with this: No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, when you join us, be willing to jettison everything else. Catchy!

Jesus' news in Luke is stark: once you sign on with Jesus, family and home are secondary. It's a full-out, no-looking-back commitment. Because now Jesus, in his own journey chronicled by Luke, has reached the pivot point – Jesus is shifting his ministry away from the villages of Galilee in the hinterlands, and "turning his face" towards Jerusalem, where the powers of Rome and traditional religion are strongest.

Jerusalem is a dangerous place for Jesus, with his message of loving all, forgiving enemies, and honoring God before all others. It's almost certain to be the place where something he'll say will be the straw that breaks the camel's back, and his enemies will converge against him. Jesus is savvy enough to know this, but goes anyway, because there are lost and lonely in Jerusalem, too, who need his message of love and forgiveness.

So Jesus begins his trek towards Jerusalem, and likely death. He has to steel himself, as well as his followers. It's now or never. They cannot turn back.

Great love begets courage.

Today's lesson isn't the light beach fare I've been yearning for this summer, no casual page-turner read by the ocean side, a gentle breeze ruffling the pages. Are you, like me, a would-be follower, happy to just quietly shut the Bible on this one, and hope for something a little more easy-going next week? Or might we be the hungry city dwellers, hoping Jesus will have the courage to come?

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Any inclination I had for the former path – just quietly closing the Bible and moving away from Luke's hard words, kept being thwarted at every turn by this week's news.

Today, Nelson Mandela lies critically ill, fighting an infection in a South African hospital, and the world is preparing for his possible death. Mandela - a living, breathing example of a man – in our times -- who sacrificed 27 years of his life in prison – locked far away from family and home – in order that his people could be freed from apartheid. He suffered the hardship and indignity of daily pounding large rocks into small ones – a futile, meaningless task– but when he emerged, he stood for reconciliation, averting the massive bloodshed a civil war would have wrought. Mandela, who turned his face towards his Jerusalem, and walked the needed road.

The news also made me think of the courageous gay men and lesbian women who fought for so long for the ruling the US Supreme Court issued on Wednesday; those who bravely came out of the closet at a time when simply being who they were could get them beaten up, spat upon, fired from their jobs, or dragged to death along a lonely road in Wyoming. Many did have to give up family and home when they came out, turning their faces towards their Jerusalem, demanding the dignity of all.

And on Wednesday, I heard this story, in a segment on WBUR, a local National Public Radio affiliate, about the Sharps, a Unitarian couple, from nearby Wellesley, Massachusetts, who in 1939 and 1940, traveled to Europe as the Nazis grabbed more and more territory in Europe, and at great risk to themselves, saved hundreds of children and other refugees.

It was 1939 and Waitstill Sharp, a Unitarian minister at the Wellesley Hills Unitarian Church, had been preaching about the dangers of the Nazis, at a time when America had little appetite for intervention. Our nation was exhausted by the previous World War and was still living in the Great Depression; we wanted to focus our problems at home, not others' problems far away. Anti-Semitism also played a role in our reluctance to get involved: many Americans were indifferent to the plight of Jews, or even hostile.

But Waitstill Sharp and his wife Martha were different. Their Unitarian teachings made the problems of one the problems of all. And they knew that were many Unitarian churches in Czechoslovakia, sections of which Hitler had annexed. When they received a call from the national Unitarian Association, asking them to undertake a dangerous trip to Czechoslovakia, where many refugees needed help, the Sharps said yes. The Sharps were distraught at the thought of leaving behind their two children, ages 2 and 7, but concluded that the work was a natural extension of their faith.¹⁷ Other couples had already turned down the invitation.

The Sharps arrived in Prague in February 1939, and two weeks later the Nazis conquered that city. The Sharps spent the next seven months assisting Czech refugees with resettlement to other countries. As the Nazi's horrific plans became more apparent, the Sharps' resettlement efforts became a rescue mission; they broke the law by laundering funds and accompanying those hunted by Nazis over the borders. Despite being followed by the Nazis, and having their offices searched, they stayed in Prague until they heard rumor that they were to be arrested the next day.

When the Sharps returned home, it was only a short time before Frederick May Eliot, president of the Unitarian Association contacted the Sharps and asked them to return, saying it was their duty.

Waitstill Sharp writes this in his autobiography: "I was taken aback by this and said, 'Dr. Eliot, my family has been broken up We are eagerly counting upon a vacation. I have two young children who need steady parenting.'"

"Vacation?" he shouted "Vacation! Europe is falling to pieces and you talk about vacation? I won't hear the word, you must go! There is no debating it."

Martha Sharp later told her grandson that their decision was excruciating, and leaving her children was the largest regret of her life. But they felt they must. On the second journey, in 1940, Waitstill and Martha worked in Vichy France. Waitstill accompanied a threatened Jewish intellectual to the US, and Martha stayed behind to arrange a kinder-transport, bringing back the to the US with her 27 children, between the ages of 3 and 17, Jewish children and those of other dissident parents.

The Sharp's work saved hundreds of people from Nazi death camps; they are two of the three Americans honored by Israel's Holocaust Museum as "Righteous Among the Nations". Gentiles who rescued Jews in the Holocaust.

The Sharps set their faces towards their Jerusalem – Nazi-endangered Europe -- and gave up both family and home to save the lives of hundreds who would have been massacred in concentration camps.

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What was it that enabled the Sharps, like the heroes of the recent Marathon Bombings, to run towards those who were in dire need, at great risk to themselves? Why did the Sharps act when so few others did? When so few other Americans, or Christians anywhere, acted? How could the Sharps do what Jesus speaks of – leaving behind home and family; taking their faith and acting on it, even at personal risk?

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Who are the followers of Jesus, the Jewish rabbi about whom we read every single week here at King's Chapel, in our Gospel lesson? One whom we say, each time we gather, we seek to follow.

To befriend the loveless, as he did.

To courageously do the right thing, even when others disapprove.

To stand with gay men and women against discrimination and denigration, even before that becomes the law of the land.

To turn our faces towards Jerusalem.

But as often as I feel inspired by these brave stories, I also feel the dread, the marbling of guilt within me. And I wonder: could I do it? Who am I, O God, to do this work? I who love my family more than myself, who treasure my home, the place I go to for shelter against life's storms. Am I ever – will I ever be – able to really follow you?

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Because I'm scared if today's lesson from Luke is only about the heavy costs of discipleship.

And I'm in good company with this fear – because all of Jesus' disciples, even those who stayed on the road with him, had the same fear. They evaded the hard lessons at every turn, even as they walked all the way to Jerusalem alongside him. They didn't understand his intent, even when they journeyed to the Garden of Gethsamene with Jesus, and raised their swords against the Roman soldiers, ready to defend their Teacher.

If I am scared because of the journey ahead, then I am just like those early disciples, because even these, the best of the best of Jesus' followers, failed the biggest test once they got to Jerusalem. They cowered. They scattered. They fled

Jesus told them, You can't look back, but on Good Friday all he could see from the cross were the footprints on the road of his retreating friends, scrambling backwards as far away from him as they could get.

If today's lesson from Luke is primarily a flashing neon sign saying Only the Perfect Followers Can Come with Me, then all 12 disciples would have barred at the door to the Upper Room, or at least sent flying by the bouncer.

All 12 were deeply flawed, disloyal, complete failures as followers. As am I. As are we all. But all 12 were also chosen by him. As are we all.

Hear this good news! Luke's story today isn't about how good we have to be, but about how great God already is.

This story is not about us, so much as it is about God – the one we see through Jesus, who went to Jerusalem to reach hungry souls despite the danger. We never have to turn towards Jerusalem alone.

Today's lesson is not about what we must do alone, but about what God working through us will do.

It's not about the qualities we need to have before we start the journey, but about trusting that if we keep start, there is One who will walk alongside us, and the way will become clear.

Because when the worst that could have happened to the disciples did happen in Jerusalem – when Jesus died a tortured death and the disciples all fled like cowards, they learned, to their shock, that that was not the end.

That little, dispirited, failed and imperfect band of followers became convinced that nothing could separate them from the Spirit of Love they'd known through Jesus – not even death.

So they got on their feet one more time, and hit the road again.

We're not asked to complete the whole journey, were asked to start, and move forward, with the help of God.

The Sharps didn't start with a grand plan for great deeds. They started by following the news, and being concerned for the plight of others in a distant land. They took one step forward when Waitstill preached to his congregation – courageous words, but not yet acts. They took another step when someone else telephoned them and initiated the idea of a trip. The Sharps started with an impulse to help other Unitarians in Czechoslovakia, who shared their faith. They set up shop in Prague, a city that initially was still free. They established a public office there, helping refugees – who still legally could leave Czechoslovakia.

And step by step, as they worked and lived among those in desperate need, their courage grew. When Nazis began to limit the cash refugees could take out the country, the Sharps began to break the law, finding ways to launder money so those in great need would have enough money to eat and survive. When Nazis began limiting which people could get visas out, the Sharps began an underground network, shepherding out the most vulnerable, including Jews and dissidents, sometimes walking them over the mountains and across the border. And then when the danger was even more profound, the Sharps returned a second time to Europe.

One step at a time, trusting that we are not alone. As you took one more step today, coming for some mysterious reason. As we all will take another step, upon leaving this place, onto roads where we are called to be of service to others.

So, as we go forth, we turn to the One who has walked this road before us, and for us, yearning to share the liberating, powerful message of God's love for all. One who promises to journey alongside us again, filling us with what we need, step by step.

*Guide us, O thou Great Jehovah
We Pilgrims through this barren land
We are weak but thou are mighty
Lead us with thy powerful hand.
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me til I want no more.
Feed me til I want no more.*