

Sunday, July 1, 2007

Pentecost 5 Proper 8C

Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

The appointed scripture readings for today are an uncanny coincidence. I could not have picked more appropriate readings for the occasion if I had tried. Both the Old Testament reading and the gospel reading speak to the reality of transitions. In the case of the Old Testament, the prophet Elijah is preparing to leave this world and so he has a little pre-departure pep talk with his successor Elisha. The two of them end up strolling down at the Jordan River, where in a sort of final display of his prophetic powers, Elijah takes off his coat, rolls it up and touches the river with it so that the waters part and he and Elisha walk across to the other side. Then, after a final conversation, Elijah is carried off into heaven in a whirlwind by a chariot of fire and horses. I can assure that my departure from Dallas will be a lot less dramatic.

The gospel lesson is also about transitions. In this case, Jesus is making his way toward Jerusalem. Along the way, he stops and calls people to follow him. Jesus' call to follow him isn't a polite request or a high powered presentation with glossy brochures and power-point. He offers no talk on the advantages of a disciple's life, or of the perks and benefits that followers of Jesus can expect. To the contrary, Jesus says that the call to follow him requires a radical and complete break with the past and of a person's goals, ambitions and priorities. So when one person says that he would be happy to follow Jesus but he first has to go bury his

father, Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury the dead.” And when another person indicates a willingness to follow Jesus after he goes and says goodbye to his Mom and Dad, Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

For Jesus, therefore, there is no room for nostalgia about the wonderful good old days of the past. There is no time to sit and reminisce; no room for sentimental journeys down memories lane. Instead, his followers are called to make a clean break with the past and to move on cold turkey into the future. Admittedly, as the gospel lesson so clearly demonstrates, breaking with the past and grabbing hold of the future is not something that we human beings are good at, especially those of us who are middle aged and older. The past makes up a good portion of our lives; it is difficult, if not impossible for us to just drop the past and move on. That is true for individuals, families, institutions like churches, and even whole countries. As someone who likes to study history, I view an understanding of the past as crucial to understanding the present and the future. As one saying goes, he who ignores the past is doomed to repeat it.

Still, Jesus makes a valid point. To remember the past is one thing; but to stay emotionally stuck in the past is another. No person, family, church or country can ever recreate the past or stop the clock. Sooner or later, everyone will have to move on. Sentimental clinging to the past is not a healthy place to be. Being

stuck in the past I fear is why many people, organizations and even countries fail to grow. As harsh as Jesus sounds in his judgment about not turning back while at the plow, and leaving the dead to bury the dead, he is right. There was never a less sentimental person to walk the face of earth than Jesus Christ. That is one lesson that the church has not learn very well.

Transitions are an inevitable part of life. All you have to do to realize that is to take out the family photo album and look at the many Kodak moments that comprise the past. They reveal just how much things in our lives have changed. As is so often the case, we remember the happy and good times while the not so happy times have a way of blessedly fading. That kind of selective memory, I suppose, is a good thing, because if we cling to the bad memories we are likely to become embittered, angry and cynical. That may be worse than a sentimental and nostalgic clinging to the good old days. In either case, however, Jesus tells us to move on. The world will not stop and wait for us to stroll down memory lane while the kingdom of God beacons us into the future.

I am well aware that Jesus' impatience with those who dwell on the past is not the accepted wisdom these days. Many counselors and gurus nowadays stress the wisdom of getting "closure" and of working through one's feelings about past events, especially the negative ones. In fact, as family systems theory teaches, the ghosts of the past can affect families for many generations to come. Until those

ghosts are dealt with, families, and even institutions, cannot successfully move on into the future. Maybe that is what Jesus means by “let the dead bury the dead.” The modern version of that would be, “The dead of the past must be truly buried so that the future can truly come.” So let go of the wounds, the hurts, the insults and the traumas of the past. And look to the future to which God calls each of us.

Yet another transition is upon us. Let’s use this moment to acknowledge that fact. It is a moment of mixed, perhaps even conflicting feelings for many of us. There is an element of regret and disappointment, I am sure. But there is also a sense that God calls us, you and me, to different but new futures that may not yet be clear or certain, but that are full of promise and potential if we are open to them. Let’s follow Jesus, if in no other way, than by letting go of the past and reaching for the futures to which God surely is leading us.

So as I prepare to ride my chariot of fire into the sunset, I express my thanks for the opportunity to share this patch of God’s good earth for a time. I ask your prayers as I begin a new ministry in Lewisburg, and I assure you of mine as you carry on the work, the important work and ministry, of Prince of Peace Church. I believe you are in good hands with Deacon Lou. I know our Senior Warden, Hugh Kelley, has been extremely diligent in laying plans for the immediate future. And I pray that God will guide and direct each of you as you discern what role you are called to play in building God’s kingdom in this place.