

6-27-10 “Listening to Our Lives” Luke 9:51-62 Rev. Kathy Hartgraves

I have chosen to preach upon this passage this morning simply because – I have always had a difficult time with it. As a woman called to ministry – I have found this scripture uncomfortable as I live my call as a pastor, a partner, a mother, friend, daughter, sister and on and on, you get the idea. All the hats I wear inform my life and I have always looked at this passage as challenging my efforts to hang on to all the things and people I love so dearly while living my call the best I can.

And so this passage is reflective of the angst and tension I often experience in my call. Along with joy - there seems to always be an element of sadness in my call to ministry and today is definitely one of those days. I look to serving Dell Rapids UMC with great anticipation and yet I am also sad as I grieve my relationship with you changing from pastor to friend. Serving among you here at Spirit of Peace has been one of the most blessed times in ministry for me. We have shared a lot, we have had a lot of fun and the past 19 months have been full of unexpected challenges.

The lesson I treasure most about you as a community - Spirit of Peace - is the beautiful way you live your call to serve - always extending love and compassion, gentleness and grace before anything else.

And so as I consider the words in our scripture this morning- they seem rather harsh and it is apparent to me that the words are not meant to be taken literally. It is a dramatization of the radical demands placed upon us when we follow the life and teachings of Jesus. And so as we consider this dramatized story and attempt to apply it to our lives today I think we are asked to hold a mirror and take a good look at our life and to ask ourselves - Is the life we are living the life we were created to live?

When we put our hand to the plow as scripture describes it – are we listening to our lives so that we can live our lives to the fullest? Do our actions and attitudes reflect our inner spirit? These are the questions today’s Gospel story causes me to ask.

This story provides for us an opportunity to pause, to see where we have been to notice how far we have come, and to ponder how our life is speaking to us and to those around us. Every time we hear the passage about

keeping our hand on the plow and not looking back we are encouraged to clear our vision, to take stock of our resources, and to refresh our dreams.

We each interpret this story from our own life circumstances. Some of us hold up the mirror feeling exhausted, worn-out and weary from all the responsibilities of life. Others of us hold up the mirror with enthusiasm and eagerness, excited about the possibilities for growth and happiness this story brings.

I have studied and reflected upon this passage many times over the years. Sometimes I have listened to this story while experiencing pain and heart ache and with tears in my heart. Other times I've tried to listen to the story while filled with anxiety over struggles and problems that loomed large on the horizon. Today, I listen to this story with deep contentment and peace of heart, full of gratitude for the years gone by that were so full of wonderful events and growth.

None of us approach this story in the same way - our life circumstances are unique. We may feel stuck in a rut, facing a dead end, or caught up in a very ordinary pattern of life. Yet, this gospel story begs of us to pause, with our hand on the plow and to look deeper, to examine our life more closely and to name those things that hold us back. We get so easily wrapped up in social obligations, in our own attachments and in our feelings about the past. We can get so bound up by our fear, need and shame that it seems impossible to put our hand to the plow and move forward.

Jesus' words from Luke this morning ask us to not only look ourselves in the mirror, but to get out our road maps of life and listen to our life. We gain great wisdom by looking at the places of our hearts so to identify the places that bless us, affirm us, enliven and enrich us. We also need to look at the situations that challenge us, test us, discourage us or maybe even have the ability to destroy us.

This story requires us to look at our inner lives and allow our life to speak to us and tell us who we are. We must listen for the truth and values that are at the heart of our identity, not the standards by which we must live, but the standards by which we cannot help but live if we are truly living our own life.

Today's Gospel story is a lot like you and me. There are times we hear the inner call of our lives and choose to ignore it. We go about our daily busyness and too often get further away from the very source that gives us life, the source that fuels our spirit and reveals our soul. It is easy to take our hand off the plow and begin to wander and forget what is of most importance. This is why we come to worship on every Sunday mornings. To remember what is important and to disentangle ourselves from the things that compete with our passion for the Holy.

There are many things we can do to help keep us focused on what is of most importance so that we live into the fullness of life we were created for. There are two things I find most helpful. The first is to ask ourselves what is of eternal significance. Are we investing our lives in things that have eternal significance? One of my favorite books of all time is a simple little book entitled "Tuesdays with Morrie." Mitch and Morrie talk about regrets. I am going to read a portion for you...

This leads me to the second thing we can do to help keep us focused on what is most important. We need to seek friends in our lives who remind us and inspire us to derive happiness from within. People who encourage us to listen to our lives and help us discern if the life we are living is the life God is creating for us moment by moment. We need to surround ourselves with people who can help us stay focused, and encourage us when the going gets tough. These are "soul friends."

Soul friends are those who listen more deeply for God's call to us, who are comfortable waiting with us as we listen to our lives – waiting for our inner wisdom to be revealed rather than jumping in with their own opinion. Soul friends know our faults and difficulties – what games we tend to play in our own hearts and minds. Soul friends understand us and care for us - no matter what.

I have been blessed with many soul friends in my life. Friends who encourage me to keep my hand on the plow – to keep my life focused on things of eternal significance. Pastor Jean and Cindy certainly serve that role for me as do many of you here today. My hope is that you have soul friends too.

You may already have Soul Friends in your life, friends who push you to always consider what is of most importance. Friends who encourage you

to listen to your life and help you commit to living with courageous authenticity. The Divine works in mighty ways through our Soul Friends.

Today's gospel story urges us to hold up a mirror and take a good look at our inner lives and listen. For some of us, there may be a sense that running beneath the surface of our life, there is a deeper and truer life waiting to be acknowledged.

Today, I keep my hand on the plow and I look to the future with great hope and expectation and I take with me these past months of our shared ministry. And today, it is your love, your grace, your gentleness, your compassion that strengthens me for future ministry. I thank you today for the example you have shown me in the way you live your faith. You as a community of Spirit of Peace are an inspiration in your commitment to justice and your prophetic witness, your dedication to the liberating struggle and the way you practice radical compassion. And I am most inspired by the way you give of your gifts, without reservation.

I am deeply grateful and forever blessed to have served with you. I am inspired by you. Continue to listen to your life and allow the truth and values that are at the heart of your identity guide everything you do. Keep your hand to the plow and continue to live your life with courageous authenticity. Thanks be to God. Amen.