

A lot of congregations, including this one, experience a drop in attendance during the summer months. Unlike some of my colleagues I don't get too upset about it; I just figure that all those churches up in Maine and New Hampshire and on the Cape are packed in July and August!

Back here in the suburbs, it's customary to have something like a *Welcome Back Sunday* or a *Rally Sunday* early in September. Next weekend, church school will resume and we will commission lay ministers. We will, so to speak, "rally the troops." And the week after that we'll have a big parish picnic which will give us a chance to welcome each other back and begin again. Labor Day weekend is sort of an in-between week—almost, but not yet; the last weekend of summer and the first weekend in September as we return to our fall worship schedule.

Time has not stood still, however, since May. The long season after Pentecost has continued to unfold; in fact, today is the *fifteenth* week since Pentecost. We have continued to plod along in what the Church has sometimes called "Ordinary Time," trying to be faithful to the call of Jesus Christ by traveling to upstate New York for work camp or knitting prayer shawls in Fellowship Hall or making crafts for the Church Mouse Fair in October. The sick have been visited, and we have had baptisms, weddings, and funerals over these past fifteen weeks, trusting God's Holy Spirit to continue to burn in us and blow through us. Much of our lives, it seems to me, is "ordinary time" with ordinary stuff that needs to get done.

All the while, we have continued to gather to hear the Word proclaimed and to share the Sacrament together, making our way through Luke's Gospel. On June 7 we reached a turning point in that narrative as we read from the ninth chapter of Luke's Gospel. There we heard Peter's Confession at Caesarea Philippi. "*You are the Christ*," Peter said. But Jesus told Peter and the others not to tell anyone, at least not yet. And then he started talking about suffering and death. They weren't ready for a Christ, a Messiah, like that. They wanted a superhero that would kick the Roman army back to Rome and here he was, insisting on being a *servant*, even to death on a Roman cross. That didn't sound like very much fun.

Not too long after that, Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51)—code language in the gospels that reminds us where that journey will end, on a cross outside the city walls. And the disciples continued to follow him there, perhaps more because they had no place else to go at that point than anything else. They still didn't understand what he was up to. At some level, they still thought that his march on the capital was supposed to bring about regime change and that they would end up with cabinet positions.

So over these past few months we've been "on the Way." We've been invited to walk along with Jesus and the disciples from the Sea of Galilee to Jerusalem. Along the way we've heard Jesus telling stories like the one about a man who behaved like a neighbor. It's an easily misunderstood and trivialized story, but like so many of Jesus' parables, it is in fact earth-shattering. A good, righteous, upstanding citizen asks Jesus how far neighborly love needs to extend. Is he supposed to love people who disagree with him politically or theologically? Is he supposed to love even sinners? Is he supposed to love illegal immigrants? Is he supposed to love people who don't worship, as he does, in the Temple?

Jesus has this way of turning things around. He could say, as he does elsewhere: yes, you have to love everyone, *even* Samaritans. But that would leave the polite, sophisticated lawyer still feeling

smug and holier-than-thou. *Alright*, he might say, *I guess I can try to do that...* Instead, however, Jesus tells him a story—a parable that leaves him with vertigo. Suppose, Jesus says, a nice young lawyer like you gets mugged and beaten up and left in a ditch to die. And because you have been beaten beyond recognition your well-dressed neighbors drive right on by, pretending that they don't even see you. And then this guy who is on his way to the mosque, a guy on the FBI's watch-list—he stops his car, gets out, and helps you out. Of course your first reaction as you see him coming toward you is that he might finish you off. But no; he goes way above and beyond the call of duty and treats you like family. What's it like to experience neighborly love from someone you have been taught to fear like that? How does that rock your world?

Jesus leaves the lawyer, who begrudgingly admits that “he guesses the man did behave like a neighbor”, pondering what would need to happen in his life for him to “go and do likewise.” And he leaves us with the same question, a question that never gets old because whether your society demonizes Samaritans or Muslims the story has the potential to be endlessly new and transformative.

We also heard about Mary and Martha this summer, two sisters trying to figure out how to balance “being” and “doing.” And we heard Jesus teaching his disciples—teaching *us*—to pray: “*Abba: hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come...*” We heard about a family dispute over an inheritance and we heard about a man who thought he could postpone living until retirement only to drop dead a week after his big retirement party. We heard Jesus giving a stewardship sermon in August, telling us that we should be mindful about where we keep our assets and that it ought to be in a place where moth and rust can't eat away at them. Basically he says that the more we have the more fearful we become about losing it all, so he suggests that we just give it all away and along with that giving attitude let go of our worry and fear as well. “Where your treasure is,” Jesus said, “there will your hearts be also.”

And then meek and mild Jesus started to go a little “John the Baptist” on us. He began to speak in the twelfth chapter of Luke about bringing fire to earth and division within families. As if we need any more of that! And by the thirteenth chapter of Luke, he is talking about weeping and gnashing of teeth, and of course an old familiar theme: *that the last would be first and the first would be last*. This kind of talk really began to make people squirm and so Jesus finds himself increasingly in conflict with “the-powers-that-be.”

Last weekend I worshipped over at Immanuel Lutheran Church; it's nice sometimes to have a chance to sit in the pews and see how the other half lives. But I heard the same gospel reading you did here (or in Maine or on the Cape or wherever you may have been!)—about how by this time the Pharisees were “*watching Jesus closely*.” They were keeping a very close eye on him so that when he screwed up they'd get him good. Jesus, in turn, is watching them just as closely. He sees how they jockey for position, how they try to find the place of honor at the table, how they worry so much about making sure that they are first.

One of the reasons I wanted to be with the Lutherans last weekend was because they are in the process of calling a new Associate Pastor over there, and he was preaching and I thought on that last weekend of summer it would be nice to be able to see this guy who will, I hope, soon be a colleague. As Lutherans are wont to do, before he preached the “adult” sermon he did a children's sermon. He had all the kids line up in front of him because he wanted to bribe them with gifts. And

then he did something very cool. After he got them all lined up, he went to the back of the line and started with the last kid. Everyone got a gift: but the last were first, and the first were last.

It made me wonder about what it's like on the playground to be the last kid picked for a kickball game, not just once or twice but day after day and week after week and year after year. And then I began to wonder what it is like for people who live their whole lives feeling like they are in last place, well beyond the playground. As hard as it's been to be a Sox fan this season, what would it be like to be a Baltimore Orioles fan? And far more seriously: what it is like to feel trapped in the cycle of poverty that leaves you without hope. Whether you live in parts of Worcester, or Rochester, NY, or in San Salvador or East Jerusalem—what does it do to your psyche, to your soul, when you lose hope? Imagine what *good news* it is in all of those places when Jesus says, “in the Kingdom of God we'll begin at the back of the line? *The last will be first...* And imagine also how disconcerting that must feel for those who feel entitled to always being first.

*Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus.* I have a feeling that most of the people in those large crowds were people who had spent a lot of time in the back of the line, or at the back of the bus. And they were beginning to walk with a little bit of a lightness in their step as they traveled with Jesus: walking with a little more hope, a little more courage, a little more joy. And then this enigmatic-demanding Jesus turns to them and says the words we heard today:

*“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”*

Simply put, Jesus tells them that discipleship is hard and nobody should pretend that it isn't hard. He says that the real work will require not just spectators but followers who are willing to make sacrifices, disciples who are committed to the cause of God's reign on earth. No doubt that cause will experience setbacks and disappointments along the way. But it is a cause that has an end in mind—the vision articulated by the prophets of old and the visionaries like John of Patmos: of God's *Shalom*, of peace on earth and good will to all. The problem is that the only way to get there is by way of the cross.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. put it on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial nearly five decades ago, “continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.” *Unearned suffering is redemptive.* That was not a popular idea in the early part of the first-century in the midst of Roman imperial power, even among Jesus' closest friends. And it didn't get the biggest applause lines on the mall in 1963, either—not like the words, “I have a dream.” And yet for Dr. King—and more importantly for Jesus the Christ—God's dream of a world where the last are first and the first are last doesn't come easily and it doesn't come without a cross. It doesn't come without some unearned suffering along the way. This sounds scandalous to some and foolish to others; but it is God's way...

And so we begin again: we are ready to “rally the troops” and to “welcome one another back in the name of Christ.” But as we do all that, may we remember that what we are called to isn't a nice social club that makes us feel good about ourselves. Like the witnesses who have gone before us, we are called to take up the cross and to follow Jesus: until the bells of freedom really do ring across this and every land for all people, until the last are first, and the first are last.