

Worth it

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, June 27, 2010: The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Galatians 5:1, 13-16, 22-25 and Luke 9:51-62.*

As the priest at St. Bartholomew's with responsibility for our Welcome and Membership ministries, my first reaction to these two readings was, "Uh-oh." Become slaves to one another. Crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. Jesus' harsh responses to those who volunteer to follow him: Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but I don't have a home of my own, or even a rental. Let the dead bury their own dead. No one who drives the car forward while looking out the back window is fit for the kingdom of God.

On the surface, this is not so visitor-friendly. If you've wandered in here this morning thinking you might come to church, or come back to church, do these words draw you in and comfort you? Our newest members, like those we welcomed formally two Sundays ago, may be thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?" Even those who've been here a while may scratch their heads or be tempted to "go to the beach" for a bit.

But if we dig just below the surface of these readings, we find something else.

The freedom Paul speaks about in this part of his letter to the Galatian churches is not political freedom, as in July 4th, or rugged individualism or inner freedom or even free will. It's not a freedom to do anything you want, but it's not a life of rules, either. It's a freedom grounded in Christ and lived out in specific communities where the old barriers of nation, race, class and gender are overcome in communion at one table. Does that sound familiar? This freedom is for mutual service in love, to be lived out in the particular community of the church, a community guided and shaped by the Spirit, bearing fruit formed by the Spirit. A church guided by Paul's radical vision would

cultivate a community of flexibility and freedom, living open to the liberating and unpredictable movement of God's Spirit. A church that knows the Spirit as God's active presence in their midst and is willing to trust and follow the guidance of that Spirit—well, who knows what that church might do. It's a big risk. It's performing without a safety net. [Richard B Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, pp 310, 329-330]

In the part of Luke's gospel we hear today, Jesus has set his face to Jerusalem. He's physically and spiritually on the road—the Way—to Jerusalem. We know, as Luke's community would have, that Jerusalem means crucifixion and resurrection.

Along that way there are these three encounters with would-be followers of Jesus. The first person enthusiastically volunteers for Jesus' mission, only to be told, hey, this isn't exactly a safe and secure kind of deal. You're not going to be staying in the best places, or even in one-star places. And by the way, you know this way leads to Jerusalem, right? Jerusalem, as in "the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to it." [Luke 13:34]

In the second encounter, Jesus actually invites someone: "Follow me." Now when he'd said that to James and John (the same two who want to call down fire from heaven on the un-welcoming Samaritans), James and John immediately left their old father in the family fishing boat and followed Jesus. Not so with this person. He's trying to obey the commandment, "Honor your father and mother." Honoring one's father meant to care for him and provide a decent, respectful burial when he died. This guy is just

trying to fulfill his duty as a son and obey the commandment. These are *good* reasons, but Jesus says no, following me comes even before that. Now maybe Jesus is using hyperbole as he's wont to do (like "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off"), but he makes a strong point. Not a popular point, but a strong point.

And the third person, who also offers to follow Jesus, just wants to say a proper goodbye to his family before he leaves. Family in this culture was the source of one's identity; you didn't have any identity outside your family, your clan, your tribe. It's why leaving home was such a big deal. It's hard for us in our 21st-century American ultra-mobile, individualist culture to relate to. Here's another person trying to do something good and honorable, but Jesus says no, following me comes first. You can't move forward while you're looking back. No procrastination.

We're not told whether any of these three people actually joins up with Jesus' group. But at the time Luke is writing, in the 80's, his community needed to hear this. Living a generation or so after Paul wrote to the Galatians, Luke's church community knew something about persecution. Luke's church needed to hear about the commitment needed to follow Jesus through suffering. Having found out firsthand that following Jesus brought them into conflict with their own families, they needed to hear about the priority and commitment that following Jesus required. Jesus' own commitment and resolve as he made his way to Jerusalem in the face of conflict, rejection and obstacles served as a powerful example to Luke's church in their own time.

Neither Luke nor Paul was writing to political governments. They were not writing to their Senators or Representatives; they were not writing letters to the editor. They were writing specifically to their church communities, communities that followed, or were trying to follow as best they could, this Jesus.

So here we are at St. Bart's, a church community, trying to follow this Jesus. What, if anything, do Luke's and Paul's words mean for us?

Martin Luther once wrote that there are two essential truths about being Christian: "A Christian is a free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

What are we free for? What are we free from? Freedom in Christ means knowing our worth resides not in power and prestige and possessions, not in who our family is or isn't. Our worth is found in who we are: we are children of God. When we know that, we can be free from letting fear drive us. We may know fear, but it doesn't have to drive us.

Like Paul's and Luke's churches, our own Episcopal Church knows something of internal divisions and conflicts. Fear is driving some in the Episcopal Church, and some in the wider Anglican Communion, to do and say some bizarre things. The Diocese of Los Angeles' recent election of a partnered lesbian woman as bishop has had repercussions, two of the strangest occurring in the last week or two. In one incident, now known as "mitregate," the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts Schori, having been invited to preach and preside at a cathedral in London, was first required to provide evidence of her ordination as Deacon, Priest and Bishop. Then at the cathedral, she was not allowed to wear her mitre (the tall hat that is one of the symbols of a Bishop's office) but rather, had to carry it. So far as I have been able to tell, no male bishops similarly invited have had to prove their ordinations or been prohibited from wearing their mitres. To her everlasting credit, our Presiding Bishop carried her mitre with grace and graciousness, showing us—as she has before—how to use our freedom "through love to become slaves of one another."

In another astounding bit of news, the office of the Archbishop of Canterbury has stated that "the growing diversity within the Anglican Communion is a problem." Growing diversity is a problem? Really? Based on what I've learned in the Episcopal Church, it seems to me that we understand diversity as a gift from God. We might well understand the expression of diversity

and the embracing of it even as fruits of the Spirit.

I think fear is driving here, rather than the radical freedom of Christ.

What's the cost of this freedom lived out in community guided by the Spirit of God? It will cost you your life. You can choose to give your life to live free in the knowledge you are a beloved child of God. A beloved child of God, no more so and no less so than every other human being on this planet, not just those who look or think like us, or who belong to our church community, local or world-wide.

What's the work? Nothing less than carrying on the work of Jesus, which is nothing less than the reconciling work of God. Our work is to live that out here within this particular church community, being—or trying to be, as best we can—slaves through love to one another.

Even if we achieve being slaves through love to one another, which maybe on our best days we do, it doesn't stop there. The even more dangerous part is that we are called to take that work of reconciliation, that work of spreading the Kingdom of God, out into the world. As we're about to do today. In just a few hours, a group from St. Bart's, plus assorted friends, will take the kingdom of God into the streets of Manhattan

as we join the Pride March. We will be a motley crew in the very best sense of that word. We'll be gay and straight, male and female, young and older, able and not-so-able, Jews and Gentiles. We'll likely have a dog or two with us, too.

The world is not necessarily going to welcome this Kingdom of God, this new way of living, because it threatens the established order. It threatens to dissolve the boundaries between us that are carefully drawn and even more carefully preserved, now as in Jesus' time, to protect power, money, privilege.

Visitors, stick around if you dare; join us this afternoon, get to know us. Members, don your crash helmets and life preservers.

Yes, it's dangerous work, this freedom Christ has set us free to live. It's challenging, it's often frustrating. It can also be exhilarating.

And yes, it'll cost you. Among other things, it will cost you your complacency. It will cost you your certainty of being right.

But for my money, it's the best work you'll ever find. It's the best job you'll ever be offered. And it's worth every bit of what it costs.

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