

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Let the Dead Bury the Dead”

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Wow! Jesus tells a “would-be disciple” today in the Gospel reading to let the dead bury the dead. Whenever I read this, I can’t help feel for “the would-be disciple”. The words our Lord chooses would have been as striking to the ears of the people of the first century as they are to our ears today. And this gives us an opportunity to get to know Jesus a little better in our own lives, to examine what motivated him in his ministry centuries ago and what motivates him today in our spiritual journeys.

You see, Jesus comes across in our Gospel reading as someone who is operating out of a real place of urgency, doesn’t he? Luke begins today with Jesus resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem, where he knows he will suffer for the salvation of the world and rise on the third day. Jesus is focused on a future where we can live forever in the life of God and he is impatient to accomplish this for us. He doesn’t want to wait around. The Gospel reading suggests that Jesus demands that same kind of vision and urgency from his followers and can get impatient with us when we settle for lesser treasure. Clearly, his disciples had troubles keeping their hearts and minds focused on the Lord’s mission, and so do we at times.

Exhibit A: we have a Samaritan village that refuses to welcome Jesus and his disciples because they were traveling to Jerusalem, a Jewish stronghold. The Samaritans didn’t like the Jews and the Jews didn’t like the Samaritans either. Succumbing to a culture of religious intolerance, James and John ask Jesus if they can call down fire from heaven to destroy this unwelcoming town. Jesus rebukes James and John because they lost sight of the mission and the whole purpose of their trip to Jerusalem. Jesus wants to save the world, not destroy it. James and John had lost their focus.

And then, Exhibit B, “would-be disciples” encounter Jesus on the road and say something that perhaps you or I have said to Jesus at some point, “Lord, I will follow you wherever you go”, but how quickly we sinners place conditions on our vows. Our promise to the Lord, “I will follow you wherever you go”, usually ends up, “Lord I will follow you wherever you go provided that it is comfortable, enjoyable and on my terms.” But you see Jesus doesn’t want half-hearted commitments from us. Jesus wants our whole-hearted and unconditional commitment. Like the Gospel today, Jesus will test us from time to time to see what our discipleship is made of.

And I believe this is how to understand Jesus’ refusal to allow a would-be disciple to go first and bury his father or for another disciple to first say farewell to his family at home. Like I intimated earlier, Jesus isn’t interested in hanging around to bury people when his mission is to destroy death forever. Jesus wants to go to Jerusalem where he will destroy the power of death through his passion, death and resurrection. Jesus also isn’t interested in people hanging around saying their goodbyes to family members. Jesus wants to get to Jerusalem where he can open the

gates of heaven so there will be no more goodbyes. At the heart of this Gospel, my friends, is the challenge to be focused on the Lord's mission as opposed to getting stuck in the sand with our wheels spinning. In our Gospel reading, Jesus doesn't want disciples that are hanging on to whatever is in the past. Jesus wants disciples that are focused on the mission that will make for a better tomorrow.

And so, as shocking as this line from our Lord is, "Let the dead bury the dead", there is a lot of spiritual gold in this statement as well. What am I getting at? It seems to me, in one sense, we can spend a great deal of our energy during the day brooding or begrudging past wounds or past relationships or bad memories or experiences. It is understandable. I do it sometimes too. Bad memories of hurts or broken relationships or sinful behavior can be a lot like carrying a rotting corpse inside of us. That is what it feels like, doesn't it, like a rotting corpse. People can spend so much energy on these memories that they can end up becoming crippled, unable to follow our Lord into a hopeful future because they have chained themselves to the past by their self-pity. Jesus tells these would be disciples, "If you want to follow me, you must first let the dead bury the dead, drop that rotting corpse you carry around in your soul, drop that corpse, let my grace help you to lighten your burden, and then follow me, not into the past, but to the future, to Jerusalem, to my cross, yes, but also to my resurrection." "No one who sets a hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God."

You know, whenever this Gospel reading comes around, the image I get in my head every time comes from that book Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. I have shared this with you before however it bears repeating because it is so applicable to our Gospel reading this weekend. During one of Harry's secret adventures through the halls of Hogwarts, Harry runs into a very peculiar and strange mirror called the Mirror of Erised. You remember this, don't you? Erised spelled backwards is, of course, desire. Recall that this mirror of desire doesn't give its victim either knowledge or truth but instead shows it prey the deepest longing and desire of the person looking into it. Harry of course becomes entranced by the mirror. Why? Because it showed him being embraced by his parents who have long since died. He spends a lot of time in front of this mirror, too much time. The headmaster comes to the rescue by explaining to Harry the dangers of the mirror, how people have wasted all their whole lives in front of this mirror. He tells Harry that he will be moving the mirror to a safer place and invited Harry to not go looking for it again. Dumbledore warns him, "It does not do to dwell on dreams, Harry, and forget to live." I love that. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live.

You see, the headmaster was worried that Harry was in danger of living out his life in a daydream instead of living in reality. I wonder to myself how many people spend their lives dreaming about what their life could have been like or should have been like only to wake up one day to discover that life had simply passed them by. This can be a spiritual trap and a very dangerous thing for the soul. The truth is, we don't need to be so preoccupied with the "would've, could've and should've's" of life when we have been so incredibly blessed with a relationship with Jesus who already loves you for the person you have been created to be.

This is why I think Jesus challenges his disciples in our Gospel reading to stop living in a dream world. It is time to wake up. Jesus gives us permission to stop brooding over the past and to stop wallowing in self-pity. It is time to let the dead bury the dead because we are going to move forward now. We are going to get focused on the mission and this mission will take us to Jerusalem. And, yes, this mission will include the cross. Yes it will, but the story does not end there does it. Conforming our lives to the Gospel, our destination will be the Lord's resurrection. And with this comes our hope for eternal salvation.