

**Sermon Proper 8**  
**Year C**

**[RCL] 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Galatians 5:1,13-25; Luke 9:51-62**

That Jesus: he can be quite enigmatic.

His disciples ask if they should command fire to come down from heaven and consume unbelievers, and he sternly tells them, “No.”

A village does not welcome him, and he simply moves on to another village.

A convert says she will follow him, “wherever you may go,” and he replies, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests.”

He invites a stranger to follow him, and that one replies, “First let me go and bury my father”—and then he says, “Let the dead bury their own dead.”

And another asks simply to say farewell to his loved ones. To this one, Jesus says, “No one who puts a hand to plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven.”

So, in sum: he refutes retaliation or violence as a response to inhospitality, and he avoids conflict by simply moving on from an uncomfortable situation.

But then he seems to say something like, “If you wish to follow me, you must drop everything and everyone in your life. Just give up everything and follow me.”

And just where is he leading? To Jerusalem, as it says in this passage “to be taken up.” To his betrayal, crucifixion, and death.

Can he really mean this? Can our Lord and Savior be ordering us to put down our livelihoods, to put aside our relationships, and to abandon our property in order to enter into pain, suffering, and the very jaws of death?

Well, it sort of depends on whether you see Jesus as someone to worship or someone to follow. Now, both of these have merit, both have their supporters, both are completely orthodox. But, for today, let’s consider the possibility that Jesus is asking us to follow. For, were we to worship him, we might expect him to save us from trials, to rescue us from danger, to keep us from harm. That’s what an omnipotent God should do, right? That’s how the Almighty really ought to treat those he loves. And that’s exactly the problem. For this is to make Jesus into a mere religion, instead of a journey toward union with God.

The theologian Richard Rohr has provided this insight, and we can benefit from following his logic for just a while longer. Rohr tells us that this shift—from following Jesus to worshipping him—made us into a religion of “belonging and believing” instead of a religion of transformation. And that’s where the significant difference lies. A religion of belonging and

believing is concerned about who's in and who's out, about what specific doctrine people subscribe to, and about how they support the institution called the church. A religion of transformation, on the other hand, focuses on change. Changing ourselves into more and more of whom God is calling each of us to be, and changing the world around us into a more hospitable place for all of God's creatures.

What Richard Rohr is suggesting is much harder work. What Jesus calls us to do is much harder work. We can be like Elisha and ask for a double share of Elijah's spirit. We can wait around for the whirlwind to pull us into heaven. And we can hope for divine power to part the waters before us. Or we can settle down and do the work given to us: to share love, to spread joy, to wage peace, to foster patience, to nurture kindness, to exhibit generosity, to seek faithfulness, to cultivate gentleness, and to strive for better self-control.

This is what it is to follow Jesus, rather than just worship him. To accept our baptismal calling to become dead to sin and alive unto righteousness. To seek, by word and example, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly—following our God on the same path. This path that may lead us directly into whirlwinds or even through the valley of the shadow of death. But also the path that will lead us from sin and death to the kingdom of heaven and everlasting life. The path can and will leave a world behind us a little better, a little kinder, and little safer. The path can and will leave us stronger, more spiritually fit, and better able to cope with whatever lies ahead.

As St. Paul puts it, we are “called to freedom” and this freedom comes by leaving things behind. Maybe not every possession, maybe not every relationship, maybe not every thing and everyone—but certainly we are called to leave behind what Paul calls “the works of the flesh.”

To leave behind strife.

To leave behind anger and quarrels.

To leave behind dissensions and factions.

And to follow Jesus on the journey toward unity: union with others, union with the world, union with the universe, and union with God.

Jesus' promise to all of us—that we will be inheritors of the kingdom of heaven: this does not promise us avoiding all difficulties in this life. The spiritual life is not one without pain, without suffering, without challenge. But if we truly follow Jesus, we have an amazing trailblazer ahead of us.

One who never repaid anyone evil for evil.

One who sought only love—with others, and with God.

One who set his face on Jerusalem, knowing that what lay ahead was torture and death.

And who one who renounced the devil and all his works, renounced the vain pomp and glory of this world, and turned away from all covetous desires of the same—and then on the third day conquered death. So that we might be endowed with heavenly virtues, everlastingly rewarded, and become the people of the way.

The way from sin and damnation.  
The way through pain and suffering.  
The way to unspeakable, unimaginable, ineffable joys prepared for us all.

This is what comes of following Jesus. Not a mere religion of belonging and believing, of who's in and who's out, of what's correct and what is not. But a lifelong journey, following Jesus along his same path. A lifelong journey of transformation of ourselves and of the world around us. A lifelong journey toward greater union with God. Amen.

*Written By The Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates*

*Written by the Rev. Dr. J. Barrington Bates. Father Barrie has served Episcopal and Lutheran congregations in California, New York, and New Jersey over the past twenty years—most recently as Interim Rector of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, Essex Fells, New Jersey. In his free time, he enjoys boating, opera, and fine dining. On an especially good day off, he finds time to pickle dilly beans. He has led Celtic pilgrimages, served on many a diocesan committee, and participated in the work of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation. He welcomes comments, questions, even corrections to his message (revdocbates@gmail.com).*

*Published by the Office of Formation of the The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.*

*© 2016 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*