

The Cost of Discipleship

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 9:51-62

June 26, 2016 Pentecost 6 C

There's an old story I love. I may have used it in a sermon here before, but not this sermon. It's about a tightrope walker who moved next door to a man we'll call Bob. The walker assembled his frameworks and cable in the back yard, and was out in all kinds of weather, alone with his balance bar, slowly walking back and forth. And Bob watched, with fear and admiration. Eventually, the walker had people in who stretched the cable across a long gully, and again and again he practiced, this time, pushing a wheelbarrow. Finally the walker told Bob that he was practicing to become the first man to walk across Niagara Falls on a tightrope pushing a wheelbarrow. The day came, all the gear was rigged, and the walker was doing his warm-up exercises. Bob came up to him, and said, "I believe in you, man, you're going to do this. I have so much trust in you that I've taken out my life savings and bet them all that you'll make it across safely."

The walker smiled and said, "You're just the man I'm looking for, Bob. Climb into the wheelbarrow."

Well, there's trust and there's trust, right? There's commitment, and there's commitment.

We're still looking at stories about the prophet Elijah and Jesus. The Elijah stories have bounced around a bit. There was the story of Elijah asking a starving widow and her son for their last bit of food, and of God making that food last through the end of the famine—and then when the widow's son died, God, through the prophet, resurrected him. Then we had the showdown at the Mount Carmel corral, where Elijah infuriated Jezebel, the Baal-worshipping queen of Israel, and killed the prophets of Baal when God ignited Elijah's offering. Next came Jezebel's evil abuse of power to kill a man who owned a vineyard that her husband, King Ahab, wanted, and how Elijah denounced him. And last Sunday, I wasn't here, but you heard the scripture reading about a discouraged Elijah fleeing Israel, to meet God at Mount Horeb. There he waited through the earthquake, wind, and fire to hear God's still small voice sending him back to do God's will in a dangerous situation.

Today, we're at the end of Elijah's career. Just to make matters confusing, a younger prophet with a name that sounds almost like Elijah's, comes into the story—Elisha. Earlier, in 1 Kings 19, Elisha became a disciple, a student, of the older prophet, after Elijah tracked him down and recruited him. Elijah had seen Elisha plowing with 12 yoke of oxen. Elijah took off his mantle, which is a little bit like the stole a minister wears today, and put it around

Elijah's neck. Elisha said he'd be right back--"Let me kiss my mother and father goodbye first," and Elijah agreed. When the younger man returned, Elijah almost had second thoughts, because he knew that he was calling Elisha to a difficult task—he weighed the cost for Elisha of being a disciple.

In the first chapter of 2 Kings, Elijah calls down fire from heaven to destroy his enemies—something you will hear more about later. Now, in the passage we heard today, the time had come for Elijah's ministry to end and for Elisha to take on the mantle of responsibility. It was time for Elijah to go, and he asked his disciple to stay behind. But Elisha insisted on staying with his mentor. A wandering group of prophets asked, "Do you know that today the Lord will take your master away from you?" Elisha acknowledged—yes, he knew—but told them to stay silent. Again, the older prophet asked the younger to stay behind—perhaps to avoid the pain of separation? But Elisha insisted on staying at his master's side. The drama increased. Finally, they came to the Jordan, the river that had dried up for the children of Israel had crossed to enter the Promised Land centuries before. Elijah rolled up his mantle and struck the water, and the river dried again for them to cross. Finally, it was time. The old man asked the younger what final gift he could give, and Elisha asked for a double share of Elijah's spirit. In Hebrew law, the double share was given to the firstborn son, so Elisha was basically asking to be adopted. The old man didn't guarantee anything, but said that if Elisha would be able to see him being taken up, then his wish would be granted. So then Elisha saw a heavenly chariot come down through the whirlwind to take Elijah to heaven, thus inheriting Elijah's spirit and his mantle of leadership. And that's where the old spiritual "Swing low, sweet chariot" comes from.

As Luke tells the story of Jesus going to be Jerusalem, ultimately to be lifted up not on a fiery chariot, but on the cross, I'm sure he had this story of Elijah in mind. As Elijah trained Elisha to carry out the role of prophet, so Jesus had previously sent out the 12 disciples on a training mission. In the next chapter, he would send out 70 followers to preach about the coming Kingdom of God, to heal, and to call them to repentance. Just before today's Gospel passage was the story of the Transfiguration when Jesus appeared on the mountaintop with Moses, and who else? Elijah. But today's passage had no special effects, no miracles. It was a bittersweet interlude. Jesus and the disciples had wanted to spend the night in a Samaritan village, but the village refused to grant hospitality. In their best Elijah mode, the disciples ask if they could rain fire down on that village, just like Elijah had done. Jesus declined, gave them a reality check, and went on. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Or, as the Message puts it, ""Are you ready to rough it? We're not staying in the best inns, you know." To another would-be follower, like Elijah had said to Elisha, "Follow me." That person asked first to go home to bury

his father. But Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." Another gave a provisional acceptance to Jesus, but said, "First let me say farewell to my family." And Jesus was tougher than Elijah had been, and said, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God"—again, a reference back to Elisha who had sacrificed his teams of oxen as a burnt offering to God when he left to follow Elijah.

As the time of the cross was coming near, Jesus knew that discipleship was going to come at a great cost. Only those willing to pay the cost need apply.

20 centuries later, a German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer would write a book by the title of "The Cost of Discipleship." He would call the church to task for peddling cheap grace, for making it too easy to accept the name of being a Christian while not challenging the Nazi oppression. He would be arrested and martyred.

A couple of decades after that, on March 7, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led thousands of African-Americans and their sympathizers up to the Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, ready to march to Birmingham. They were pledged to nonviolence and passive resistance. Those who blocked the bridge were willing to use whatever force was necessary to stop them. The day became known as Bloody Sunday—nearly 80 were injured and others imprisoned. But that clash of violence against nonviolence caught the spirit of the nation. That march was a costly expression of faith in the God who desires all his children to act for love and justice.

We won't likely experience oppression and violence for being a Christian, not in this land, at this time, anyway, but still sometimes we are challenged to pay the cost of discipleship. A woman I know from another congregation I served is a lawyer. Early in her career, she noticed that a colleague of hers, an older, male colleague with more seniority, was carrying out a practice that was less than ethical. Dare she upset the apple cart and challenge her colleague, no matter what the consequences? She asked her mother what she thought, and her mother said that challenging was the right thing to do, so she wouldn't have to live with her own conscience. She did raise the issue with her colleague, and thankfully, he backed down from his unethical plan. She didn't get into trouble, but she could have. She was willing to pay the cost of discipleship.

The two scripture stories today both remind us that there is a cost to being a Christian; but that the reward is so much greater. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon