

No Turning Back

“When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands, which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”

I hope, as we are just three days before the Fourth of July, that all of you recognized those words as the first two paragraphs of the document passed by the Second Continental Congress on July 4th, 1776; the Declaration of Independence, which is recognized as the birth certificate of this 231-year old experiment in republican democracy, the United States of America. These days, we may think of that document primarily as a good place to hide a treasure map, thanks to the 2004 film *National Treasure* with Nicholas Cage. If we think of those who passed and signed the document, we are likely to think of them as that jolly and rambunctious bunch of singers and dancers from the Broadway musical *1776* or as a bunch of old men, some of whom became Presidents, some of whose faces adorn our money or, in the case of one, whose signature has become the logo of a well-known insurance agency. It's worth remembering, or learning, some of the real facts about these men. Ben Franklin was the only really old man who signed the Declaration. Eighteen of the 56 signers were under 40; three were in their 20s. Twenty-five were lawyers or jurists. Eleven were merchants. Nine were farmers or large plantation owners. One was a teacher, one a musician, and one a printer. It's also worth remembering that these men paid a terrible price for their patriotism. Five signers were captured by the British and brutally tortured as traitors. Nine fought in the War for Independence and died from wounds or from hardships they suffered. Two lost their sons in the Continental Army. Another two had sons captured. At least a dozen of the fifty-six had their homes pillaged and burned. Some of the stories are truly heartbreaking. John Hart, a New Jersey farmer, was driven from his wife's bedside when she was near death. Their thirteen children fled for their lives. For over a year he eluded capture by hiding in nearby forests. When he finally returned home, he found that his wife had died, his children disappeared, and his farm and stock were completely destroyed. Hart himself died in 1779 without ever seeing any of his family again. In light of the fate of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence, the last sentence of the document is particularly meaningful: “And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of

divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

Of course, it is not only American patriots who have put themselves at risk for their principles, relying on the protection of divine Providence. Over the centuries, many men and women have made similar stands for God, suffering to promote spiritual liberty rather than the political kind. We remember those who paid a great price as martyrs or heroes of the faith. This morning, I think particularly of John Bunyan, who wrote the words to the hymn, “He Who Would Valiant Be,” which we sang a few minutes ago, and of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bunyan was not only the author of the famous Christian allegory, Pilgrim’s Progress, but also one of our Baptist forebears. One of the earliest English Baptists, Bunyan was imprisoned for preaching without a government license and spent over 12 years of his life in jail. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a more recent martyr, a German theologian who defied the Nazis and even participated in an unsuccessful plot to kill Adolf Hitler, for which he was hanged near the end of the war. One of his great books is entitled The Cost of Discipleship, a series of reflections on the Sermon on the Mount in which Bonhoeffer posits, “Discipleship requires us to make a fundamental decision to follow Jesus and to accept the consequences of that decision.” “When Christ calls (someone) to follow him,” Bonhoeffer wrote, “he bids that (one) to come and die.” Bonhoeffer and Bunyan both demonstrated in their writings and in their lives that they understood the sometimes total nature of sacrifice that faith demands.

Both of the readings I shared with you earlier from today’s lectionary tell stories of the place of sacrifice in our faith, stories of the cost of discipleship. The first is a continuation of the story of Elijah which we heard last week. During Elijah’s encounter with the “still, small voice” of God in the cave at Mount Horeb, the Lord instructs him to go and anoint Hazael as king over Aram, to anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel, and to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as his own successor. In the NRSV translation which I read earlier, the first encounter between Elijah and Elisha sounds much like the encounter between Jesus and the reluctant disciples on the road from Samaria to Jerusalem, with Elijah proving a softer touch than Jesus. At least, that’s the understanding of many of the commentators I read on this passage. I wonder, though, if that’s really true. Both the Hebrew and the Septuagint Greek of this passage are ambiguous where Elijah’s response to Elisha’s request for delay are concerned. The NRSV renders Elijah’s words as “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” That’s a little hard to decipher. Is it kindly permission or acerbic dismissal? One respected translation of the Septuagint translates this as, “Elias said, ‘Return; for I have done with thee.’” That’s certainly a little clearer. But in either case, notice that the scriptures never say that Elisha indeed returned to his parents for a farewell. Instead, the young plowman performs a surprising act that can only be understood as burning his bridges behind him. He kills the oxen he had been plowing with and burns their yoke, traces and plow to cook their meat, which he serves to the others plowing in the field, presumably his parents’ servants. I don’t know about you, but I don’t think I’d equate a loving farewell kiss from one of my kids who was leaving on a journey with having them slaughter two of my oxen and give the meat to my field hands in an impromptu, middle of the workday barbecue. Even if I was rich enough to have eleven other yokes of oxen, that kid would be in trouble the next time I saw him. Elisha, it seems to me, has not only unconditionally declared he’s done being a farmer but alienated his family as well. He has proven to Elijah, and to God, that he will not be distracted from the call by yearning for what he had before.

Luke tells a story in which Jesus, like the impatient version of Elijah, is unwilling to wait for new disciples to get their lives together before they follow him. Twice in three verses just prior to what I read, Luke says of Jesus, “his face was set towards Jerusalem.” Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem to die. Anyone who is already following him, anyone who joins up now, runs the same risk. As Bonhoeffer wrote, “When Christ calls (someone) to follow him, he bids that (one) to come and die.” There is nothing to mitigate the difficulty of the journey ahead; there will be no luxurious accommodations along the way, indeed no accommodations at all are likely. There is no time for ritualistic nicety, such as funerals, when the living God is on the move. One must keep up or be left behind. And there is no place among the disciples of Jesus for those who would look back over their shoulders and yearn for the life they’d left behind. Just as with the light Palestinian plow behind a hard-to-control ox, inattention to the task at hand would lead to a crooked furrow, a ruined field, or worse. Jesus demands that those who follow him give their attention one hundred percent to mission of the Good News of God.

How are we to interpret this intransigence of Jesus, his uncompromising standard for discipleship? What does this mean for our lives? On the one hand, it is good for us to remember that sacrifices are likely to be necessary as we follow Jesus. As Martin Luther famously said, “A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.” In return for the freedom that God gives to our lives, to our souls so often chained by fears and desires, as we read last week, in return there are now expectations for our lives, that out of gratitude and love we would live lives honoring to God and to God’s creation. That means giving up some of the things that our culture teaches us are important, which aren’t, of course, important at all. It may even mean giving up some things that are important for things that are even more important. Just ask John Bunyan or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We are unlikely to have to give up 12 years of our lives to imprisonment for our faith as Bunyan did, or end up in a hangman’s noose as Bonhoeffer did. But our allegiance to Christ may mean a difference in the jobs we accept, in the places we live, in the people we choose to be friends with, in the way we choose to spend our time.

Bruce Epperly, Professor of Practical Theology at Lancaster Theological Seminary, addresses this difficult issue in his commentary on our passages. “This is a challenge to contemporary Christians,” he writes. “While Christian liberalism has rightly affirmed that God can be served anywhere and through any practice, liberalism has often lost its spiritual edge in a world where Sunday mornings are dominated by soccer games and home improvement activities. Mystics see God everywhere and affirm that God can be worshipped anywhere. Yet, mystics also affirm that we will more fully experience God in all things if we commit ourselves to special moments of worship, prayer, and contemplation. While Jesus is not directly challenging the value of soccer games and family gatherings that often trump church attendance, he is reminding us that, at the end of the day, a good life is a result of our faith, personal commitments, and experience of God and this must be nurtured with the same care that we use to further our children’s intellectual, athletic, and social well-being.” I would add that those of us who take pride in our professions would never dream of spending less than the standard 40 hours per week at our craft; those of us with artistic abilities or hobbies spend many hours honing those skills. How do those expenditures of time compare to the hours we spend every week in worship and Bible study? Which is more important? Through these demands on his disciples, Jesus is actually giving us permission to reject what Epperly calls “the nebulous norms of our community” in favor of a

No Turning Back

conscious prioritization of the spiritual goals in our lives. We don't have to keep up with the Joneses in activities any more than we do in stuff. We can turn aside from the less important in order to focus on the truly important. Matthew records Jesus' promise for us in this regard: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

It is also true that our loving God most often calls us to make sacrifices for and to give precedence to the things that we find ultimately please our hearts the best. Not all of us are called to leave family, home and profession as Elisha was. Indeed, most of us are called to show God's loving presence to the world precisely through our families and professions. When this is true, then our call is to give the kind of commitment to family and work that we would give to any ministry God set before us. Speaking for myself, I can say that God has called me to a number of different ministries in my life, encompassing the professions of artist, teacher, administrator and, now, pastor. But first, God called me to be a husband and a father. When I fulfill those callings with the love and the commitment that Jesus exemplified in his ministry, then I am blessed. When my behavior as a husband and father is not motivated by the love of Christ, then my family lets me know it and rightly so. When I do not pursue excellence in my profession with the passion of ministry, then work is just a job and I am quickly disenchanted with my lot.

This attitude of unselfish commitment to day-to-day calling is very in keeping with the monastic rule of the Benedictines. It is about doing the ordinary extraordinarily well, about making all of life a prayer and an offering to God. It is, as Paul might say, presenting our selves to God as a living sacrifice. It is a different way, according to Rev. Dr. Greg Rickel, of setting our faces toward Jerusalem, just as Jesus did. He writes, "Setting our face toward Jerusalem is to tilt our head in a way that makes us see things as never before, makes us walk in directions we might not have ever walked, provides us with companions we may not have ever picked if left to ourselves." In a mysterious and gracious way, God turns the cost of discipleship into the benefit of discipleship.

We will not receive an invoice for the cost of discipleship. Our accounts were marked "paid in full" long, long ago. The price of our freedom, of our eternal and abundant life, was paid by the one who said, "This is my body broken for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood." As we take and eat and drink in remembrance of Jesus, let us remember that he set us free to choose whether or not to follow him into the kingdom of God. Let us leave the plows of our cultural striving, the plows of money and power and fame and all the other glittering distractions of the broken world. Let us set our feet in the path that Christ forged for us, let us put our hands to the plow of the Good News of the Kingdom. Let there be no turning back, no turning back.