

Letting Go, Moving Forward

1 Kings 19: 19-21 Luke 10: 1-11

I may have mentioned in passing that my wife had moved on from redecorating the kids' bedrooms to her grandest project, the re-design of my office. That's a process which has structurally been accomplished, but admittedly there are a variety of loose ends that need to be addressed.

An affliction that I know I share with more than a few is that I keep things far beyond their worthwhile use. In working through the stuff that had taken residence in my office, I came across a lot of these items.

These included trinkets, bits and pieces of things, memorabilia, "neat stuff," and papers, books, and such that I knew I would either need or find useful on some certain day in the future, being so glad on that future day that I had the foresight to retain these otherwise useless objects. I suppose there was maybe one item out of every hundred that I would save which would see the light of that wonderful day of needfulness.

I decided that, since we had been in the house 11 years, I would draw a 10 year line in the sand, disposing of things that I had kept for 10 years or so and never found useful. All they were doing was taking up space. I freed up a lot of space. There is more that has to go, but I've made solid progress.

Physical items like you'd find in an office or a barn or a closet or a dresser are easier to dispose of than other things that we hold onto for too long. Many of you have had to clean out a spouse's belongings after their death. It can be very hard for some people to do. It's sure to bring back memories of times past when that person was around. It's sure to be a vivid reminder that that person is no longer there in your life, in the familiar place, in their annoying way. Despite the difficulty, it is also a very helpful way of engaging the process of reconciliation, of allowing the grieving process to work itself out. By setting aside the things that are part of the past, clearing them aside in effect, it helps to open the way forward. It has a healing effect of ordering that which is no longer part of one's life going forward, like putting away old files or removing old files to an attic archive, or just directly to the dump. In this house-cleaning, we're letting go not only of the things, but also of some of the emotions attached to them. It's a necessary process.

Like I said, the things are easier to dispose of than the emotions. Yet the emotions need to be laid to a comfortable rest, too. Unless the emotional side is addressed, the way forward remains hampered with a spiritual baggage that drags one down like clinging to an anchor, and holds you down, holds you back.

It's an essential property of faith that it is faith that points us forward, empowering us to move with a degree of confidence and security into the unknown ahead. Faith enables our meeting the unknown on different terms when our life or our life's situation has markedly changed.

Letting go and moving forward are characteristics that make Abraham a sterling example of faithfulness. He left go of all that he knew and moved forward in response to God's sacred summons. There are plenty of other examples, but so often the details are sparse and the account seems rather un-dramatic. Think of Jesus' calling the first disciples as they drop their nets and walk off into the unknown with a character whom they presumably had met only moments before. The summary nature of that story should never sit well with the listener.

In the passage from 2 Kings in Elijah's call to Elisha, we get some of those details. Part of God's instruction to Elijah on the mountaintop – besides telling him to go back the way he came – was to select and begin grooming his successor, Elisha.

Elijah finds him, and what is Elisha doing? He's plowing a field. (Here are one of several allusions between Elijah's story and Jesus' story in Luke.) Elisha is plowing the field with 12 yoke of oxen. That's a lot of oxen. A farmer would consider himself blessed to have one ox for plowing. **Twelve** oxen indicate the wealth that Elisha possesses

Let's go one step further. Imagine 12 oxen plowing. That's a lot of oxen. What's he plowing? How big is the plow? How do you handle 12 oxen? Considered that way, it's rather absurd, plowing overkill to say the least! Of course, 12 as the symbolic number of the tribes of Israel makes sense, too, as Elisha has this sacred calling coming his way.

What follows is a strange sequence, starting with Elijah simply draping the mantle onto Elisha's shoulders and walking away. There is no anointing mentioned that would indicate the fulfillment of the calling. Instead, we see how Elisha has to run to catch up to Elijah and asks the prophet to allow him time to say farewell to his mother and father. Elijah says, *Go ahead*. But then he says something no one really understands, *What have I done to you? or Have I done anything to you?* There is no reply by Elisha so commentators feel the prophet is saying in an odd way, 'What have I done to prevent you (from saying good-bye to your parents)?' Or is Elijah saying perhaps, 'Do you know what I have done to you?' as in 'Do you know what you're getting into?'

The lack of verbal reply may be irrelevant when we hear what Elisha does. He slaughters the oxen – all 12 presumably – uses the plow for firewood, and has a huge barbecue. He gives away the food and then he follows Elijah. In a bold, definitive statement, Elisha has acted without words to commit himself to the mission ahead. He has reduced his known life to ashes in order to fully accept the mantle that Elijah has conferred upon him.

Elisha takes the time to do something that Jesus would not have allowed, perhaps given the greater sense of urgency for Jesus' mission, or perhaps to set Jesus apart as even greater than Elijah the great prophet. In any case, Elisha goes back only to finalize his decision with actions that demonstrate that there is no turning back for him. His actions are clearly setting aside his past right up to that point, letting go completely. He surrenders his known life, renouncing that life by liquidating it in order to become a

servant of God and join the prophet Elijah on his mission. Elisha is moving forward in faithfulness to the prophetic mission which he has been given.

As stark as Elisha's actions may seem, we find Jesus teaching his disciples as they get some field testing experience related in Luke 10.

In the section just before our passage, Jesus is making his move to Jerusalem, but he is in Samaria. He sends messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to see if they will receive him, and Jesus is rejected. This is when the disciples ask if they should call down 'fire from heaven to destroy them.' Of course, Jesus rebuked them for such a silly (and horrible) thought. Yet it is also a rather deliberate echo of the story of Elijah's calling down fire in the contest with the Ba'als. Luke is saying that Jesus is *like* Elijah, the great prophet, but Jesus is **not** Elijah – Jesus is *more* than Elijah.

As they make their way to the next village, Luke recounts a series of conversations. The first is: *Someone said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'* Jesus has explained how the faithful servant of God and disciple for the Lord's Kingdom is like one who is homeless in the world, only at home where the mission of the Lord summons them.

The second is: *To another [Jesus] said, 'Follow me.' But he said, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'* But Jesus said to him, *'Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.'* Jesus isn't being callous here. The urgency and priority of the mission work of the Kingdom is certainly being emphasized. The other thing is that those who follow Jesus must move forward in faith, letting go and leaving behind the attachments to their former life. Elisha would have understood perfectly.

The third seems to hearken directly to the example of Elisha's calling: *Another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'* Jesus said to him, *'No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'* While Elisha is given time to set aside his life up to that point, this disciple is not given the option. Again, the urgency and priority of the coming Kingdom is the total focus of this difficult instruction. And again, Jesus is being identified in contrast to Elijah and Elisha, Jesus is more than any previous prophet. Jesus' mission for the Kingdom is the pivotal event that requires a more dramatic set of rules.

We've already seen a set of demands that require letting go of what once was the way of life in order to move forward with a rather radical faithfulness into the known and unknown challenges of building the Kingdom. This continues in today's reading in Luke 10.

Having *set his face toward Jerusalem*, Jesus is moving forward with his disciples. Still moving through Samaria, Jesus decides to send seventy of his disciples ahead of him. Seventy? Yes, seventy. In Matthew, the parallel account has Jesus sending the Twelve on a mission. In Luke, the Seventy refers back to Moses. You'll recall that

Moses' work got to be too much and he brings 70 elders to the mountain where they prophesy in the Spirit. Scholars are pretty certain that Luke is continuing to draw from the images of the lives of both Moses and Elijah, the two figures who joined Jesus at the Transfiguration.

Jesus sends the Seventy out in pairs apparently, even though the Greek text has literally "two-by-two." They're sent ahead of Jesus once again, still in Samaria, not friendly territory for Jews or for Jesus, with the admonition that they're like lambs among wolves. They receive a specific set of instructions this time.

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. The 'no greeting on the road' instruction is part of being on unfriendly turf. No purse that might contain money is to be taken along. No bag that might carry clothes or provisions is to be brought. Even sandals are excluded for the Seventy. They're to appear at a place in their garment only, bearing their witness of faith in the coming Kingdom and the good news of new life in Jesus as their primary mission. This isn't about them, going from house to house like beggars and seeing who will receive them, provide them with hospitality, and how much they might get for themselves. Jesus tells them: *Eat what is set before you; heal the sick who are there, and tell them, "The kingdom of God is near you."*

If welcomed, they're to be witnesses to the Kingdom. If not, they still remain witnesses to Kingdom and simply depart.

Their movement forward is entirely anchored in faith; there is no support or security to sustain them, not even sandals for their feet. Freed from attachments, symbolizing a new life in their sparse presentation, they've let go and left all behind as they move forward in faith, hand-in-hand with their Lord and Savior.

Our work today shares some of the same features that we've found recurrent in these passages. Each disciple has the need to let go of what has been our life situation. In this letting go, we are becoming prepared to move in a new direction, open to acting faithfully. Stripped of our customary attachments and comforts and even equipment, we move into known and unknown fields of endeavor with faithful witness as our priority and the advancement of the kingdom as our mission.

Wherever we are on life's journey, the call remains the same, to let go and leave behind and cast aside. Releasing the past and even the present, we become open and willing vessels for the miraculous work of the kingdom that God's Spirit empowers us to do in Jesus' name. In this way, we're called to follow in the footsteps of those many disciples who have gone before us in faithfully moving forward.