



June 30, 2013

Roots – Luke 9:57-62

Larry DeLong

Remember, at this point, Jesus is still considered a rabbi, a teacher; his miracles viewed as confirmation of his credentials to speak about God, and so people are seeking to hear what he has to say. These three short snapshots of Jesus and these potential disciples have, really, one theme. Jesus tells them: To follow me, to share in my work, requires first and foremost total commitment to that work.

Most people look at the Bible two ways simultaneously: first, as the Word of God, to be respected and obeyed; and second, as difficult to understand, even a little scary. So, it's a holy book, and we'll just keep a respectful distance from it. If we actually read it, it's in pieces, or we read it without considering what it might actually be telling us – it's important, gives us important guidance, but remote, and rarely scrutinized.

1

Now, in honor of our anniversary last Friday, I'm going to tell a story on my dear wife, Valerie. (We're leaving on vacation tomorrow, so you see how well I'm setting the stage for lots of time together...) Anyway, one thing I learned very early on in our marriage is that Valerie

has never been much for reading instructions to anything. That's my job – if I get the chance! Generally, she just does, and figures out as she does. Works for her. Most of the time.

But, sometimes... For example, shortly after we were married and I was off on the other side of the world somewhere, she decided to listen to a cassette tape (remember those?). So, she got her tape recorder down from the shelf, put in the tape, and lo and behold, nothing happened. So, she took out the tape and *tossed* out the tape recorder.

When I got home some weeks later, I asked her where the tape recorder was. She replied, "It was broken, so I threw it out." I asked, "Did you check the batteries?" "Oh, I didn't know it had batteries." Oops.

2

That's sort of how many good Christian people look at the Bible. It's sometimes called "God's Instruction Book," and in many ways it is, but like most everything, it really helps to know how to use it, which is why we have instructions. In the case of the tape recorder, it needed batteries; in the case of the Bible, it needs our brains (along with prayer, care, and – above all – use!).

That's why you're so often encouraged to read and especially study the Bible. The more familiar you are with it, the more you ask it questions and search out answers, the more it will help you. You see, with some very important exceptions, it's not like an instruction manual:

you can't look up your problem and get exact guidance, at least not easily. Think of the instruction book that tape recorder had: it began with how to put the batteries in, but it had no specific guidance to tell you to check your batteries if it didn't work – no troubleshooting guide. You had to infer, to make the connection yourself.

Part of what a sermon ought to do is suggest how a particular Bible story or passage might fit into some part of your life, give you guidance, set your course, get you going, suggest you check your batteries. “Here's what Ezekiel's words say to us today,” for example; “Jesus intends this parable to give us comfort in our faith;” that sort of thing.

Jesus' three “words” of advice to these three would-be disciples (we aren't told whether they followed him or not, at least not here) are not simple instructions; they require reflection, consideration. They seem to say that those who commit themselves to following Jesus will not be settled, that there will be open-ended parts to their lives, being, in effect, “rootless”: he says, “The Son of Man (Jesus) has no place to set his head;” “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God;” “No one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom.”

We all have some sort of roots, life-anchors, which we use to gauge our place in the world. Family roots, perhaps; cultural roots; roots of your presence that have grown into a particular place, like a community or a home – your own space.

Each of these three sayings of Jesus says “put the Kingdom of God, put following me ahead of anything else – including your roots.” In the first, “you may say you’ll follow me anywhere, but it will be *everywhere*, not one spot.” In the second, “to follow me, you need to turn your family ties over to the one who created you; it’s not your choice or convenience that govern the coming of the Kingdom and your part in it.” In the third, “not even your life is your own. Your future is in God’s hands; keep your eyes on where they guide you.”

That’s all really tough stuff for most of us to hear. We are tied to people, places, and things, because these are what consume our time, energy, and thought. Green Valley is a little different, since so few of us are without ties to somewhere else, and many sort of eased into being permanent residents over a period of years – if we ever have. Still, we have a human instinct to claim some things as ours, and among the strongest of these feelings are around home and family or friends. Roots.

For years, I referred to Old Forge as “home,” even though I haven’t been there for seven years, and then only for a few days. Valerie used to catch me on that, and rightly so. One thing that binds the two of us together is our common need for a place to call “home” – a place to stay, to say is ours, our family’s. But true to Jesus’ words today, we’ve found ourselves in a lot of places.

I know that for me the first time I saw Green Valley and met you people of this congregation, I had found “home.” This is home. You are part of my family. That is why I feel called to be one of your pastors. And that’s a part of the Kingdom.

Now, if you’re confused at this point, that’s okay. I really am saying two things that don’t seem to go together: that as followers of Jesus, we can expect to be perpetual wanderers in this life, strangers in a strange land that’s never really our home. As Jews are taught to say when explaining who they are as a people, they refer to Abraham, saying, “My father was a wandering Aramean...” In a sense, we are to be “poor, wayfaring strangers.” Yet, at the same time, we have a right and proper longing for rootedness, which itself comes from God: we just don’t always recognize that.

Perhaps this story will help. My boyhood town was paradise for a boy: no poisonous insects, plants, or animals; lots of woods without dangerous critters; no dangerous people to speak of. So I roamed far and wide, often by myself, exploring and playing with nature first-hand.

It was very easy to get caught up in all the things around me: the river and the fish, chipmunks and squirrels, rocks and water, friends – plenty to keep me busy. I felt at home there.

But eventually, inevitably, it would be time to come back to our house for a meal or bedtime. My Mom kept a black-and-white plastic

whistle in the kitchen, and when that time came, she'd walk out the back door and blow it.

No matter where I was or what I was doing, I could hear that whistle, and I'd come running home (I was obedient at least in that way).

Now, here in this life, we have work to do, things to see, people to be with. We have obligations to this world, and they are plenty distracting, not to mention the priority of the work of God's Kingdom.

But we do have roots, deeper than any family tie or personal space, and they are in the Kingdom. Don't expect to ever be fully comfortable here in this world, even if that's what you really want more than anything else, or if some set of circumstances seems ideal, or if you're so distracted that there doesn't seem to be anything around but what you can see or touch or hear: because one day you will be called, like my Mom with her whistle, to your true home, to the place you are truly meant to be for eternity.

That is why Psalm 23 – settings of it, to be sung – are all three of our hymns and part of our anthem today. We are wandering; but we have a shepherd, who guides that wandering, and has a place for us prepared to rest in his Kingdom.