

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 21, 2010

We turn now to the lessons for Sunday, June 27, 2010, which is Proper 8 and the 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time. I expect that it will also be, for many churches, the beginning of their summer schedule.

I Kings 19: 15 - 16, 19 - 21

This is a snippet from the wonderful story of the prophet Elijah's flight, following his victory over the prophets of Baal and death-threats from Queen Jezebel. Elijah rapidly cycles from great victory and courage to the depths of suicidal despair. Our verses come from Elijah's encounter with the still, small voice of God at the mountainous cave and then his calling of Elisha. It's hard to see how a preacher could preach on this without adding some verses, or at least rounding things out by telling the fuller story. As it stands, it is pretty much a foil for the gospel lesson in which Jesus calls people to follow him and speaks of the cost of doing so. Emphasis may fall there (the call of Elisha), or on an earlier point in the story, the theophany at the cave, in which the bubble of Elijah's grandiosity is burst. Lamenting that he (Elijah) alone is left as the single faithful person in the entire realm, Yahweh says, "Well, not exactly." Those who care deeply are often subject to depths of loneliness and discouragement. The antidote, at least here, is perspective, taking God seriously but taking yourself less seriously, and turning to the task of raising up a new generation of leaders and faithful.

Galatians 5: 1, 13 - 25

This will be the Sunday before July 4. Some preachers will be tempted to save this text for the following Sunday or do an early sermon for Independence Day on freedom, springing off 5: 1, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Sounds like a proof text for the Tea Party crowd. Is it? Hardly. The issues Paul is dealing with (reimposition of cultural requirements and human religious practices as the pre-requisite for salvation) have to be taken seriously. That is the context of the text must be attended to. Moreover, Christian freedom and popular understandings and American definitions of freedom are often at variance. Christian freedom is paradoxical. We are free in obedience to the will of God in Christ. American freedom tends to mean, at least in less dignified forms, "I'll do whatever I damn well please. I'm answerable to no one but me." These tensions may be explored by turning to verses 13 - 25, where freedom in Christ leads to care and responsibility for others, and where "doing whatever I damn well please" would not be living by the Spirit but by the flesh. Now, one could do a great Independence Day sermon exploring these tensions, the places Christians can affirm the American experiment and the places we must raise questions and dissent.

Luke 9: 51 - 6: 2

This text marks a turning point in the narrative of Luke as Jesus now "turns toward Jerusalem." All the rest will be shaped by this journey and context. There are two sections in these verses. In the first, Jesus and the disciples are not received by a Samaritan village, which prompts the disciples to suggest calling in a bombing raid. Jesus "rebukes" them. Apparently people are free to say "no." Moreover, such tit-for-tat, we'll-show-you behaviors are not worthy of Christ (though the disciples then, and often now, seem not to get this). In the second scene, a series of three would-be disciples indicate their desire to follow Jesus to which he responds not with warm or easy encouragement but with deeper challenge. He makes it clear, clearer I think that the modern church, that Christian discipleship is no easy, low-demand, when you get fit it in venture. It demands everything of us. However, preachers need to be careful to distinguish what God wants from us which is, well, just everything, and what the church asks or demands. This is not about going to more and more church meetings. It is about giving our lives, wholly, to God. In the context of the prevailing consumer orientation in our society, this text is a bigtime challenge. Church leaders keep trying to figure out what people want and how to give it to them. But maybe what we want and what we need aren't the same? Maybe what we most need is to get over framing everything in terms of us, what works for us, what enhances our lives and what we want? Preaching remains a wonderful and a dangerous business, even today.