

Sermon for Proper 8C
Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio
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Risking Everything For Love, Only Love

As I have been praying, studying, and praying some more with the Scriptures before us this morning, I cannot tell you how many times the faces of those mentors of mine who have blessed my life came flowing back to me.

The first faces who appeared were those of Dominican Sisters and Sisters of St. Joseph who witnessed what it meant to be faithful, prophetic, and courageous followers of Jesus who struggled and remained in the institutional church in order to speak truth to power so that justice remained at the heart of their vocations.

Walter, a Roman Catholic priest/friend/mentor encouraged my first studies at Weston School of Theology, the Jesuit theologate, once located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Walter always encouraged my spiritual journeys, even to the point of coming forward at my ordination to the priesthood, as the Bishop invited Episcopal priests to lay hands upon me as the Bishop Johnson offered the prayer of consecration of a priest.

Lois Stephens, who served in the Diocese of Massachusetts as Director of Formation, who recommended me to the Rector of the first parish where I served as an Assistant priest, responsible for children, youth, and families, as well as adult formation.

M. Thomas Shaw was a member (monk) of the Society of St. John the Evangelist and my spiritual director before his election as Bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts. His encouragement of me as I entered the ordination process in the Diocese of Massachusetts was nothing short of miraculous and his Episcopal leadership following the suicide of our newly retired Diocesan Bishop, gave the clergy and lay people of that very large diocese hope in that time of despair and grief, while calling us forward to serve the hurting children of God, within and beyond our parishes.

What about you? Who have been those miraculous messengers of God's grace who happen to show up, seemingly out of nowhere, and provide light in the midst of darkness, hope in the face of despair, and peace in the midst of turmoil?

So many of mine are now in the great communion of the saints in heaven. And yet even there, they rain down upon me, the grace of their faithful spirits.

Today, we are offered just such a peak at one of those transformational stories of mentorship and the miracle that is bestowed upon one who is called to prophetic leadership.

Following God's command, Elijah sought Elisha while Elisha was plowing and cloaked him with his mantle. Although Elisha initially asked to kiss his parents goodbye, he ultimately sacrificed his oxen, thereby sealing his break with old ways of being.

We do not know in any detail what goes on between Elijah and Elisha from the initial call to today's text, we do know that Elisha has been attending Elijah and has some pretty amazing experiences of "on the job training" as a prophet to Israel.

On the job training is one way to describe the disciples accompanying of Jesus' and the fact that immediately after Pentecost, we hear of them welcoming 3000 new converts who "devoted themselves to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42)!

Throughout Scripture, we have the examples of those who not only took upon themselves the responsibilities of discipleship, we know that with the responsibilities often came tremendous cost, even including their own death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's insistence upon costly grace challenges my own understanding of sacrifice and cost required of those who profess to follow the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love. Bonhoeffer writes:

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace. Cheap grace is grace... without costs. Cheap grace is grace without true discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without the living, incarnate Jesus Christ... Costly grace is the Gospel, which must be sought again and again, the gift which has to be asked for, the door at which one has to knock. It is costly, because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs people their lives, it is grace because it thereby makes them live. From: Discipleship, p. 43-45

So let's ask ourselves a difficult question we may truly wish to avoid. For what, for Whom are we willing to experience costly grace? For what, if not for Whom, are you and I willing to risk everything? Yes, perhaps, even death, of one sort or another?

And yes, are we who profess to follow in the Way of Jesus, the Way of Love, truly willing to sacrifice what we have worked so long and hard to accomplish? If so, then, how do you and I define, "success" as a follower of Jesus Christ?

Elijah knew Elisha would be his successor. And yet it was God who called him as prophet. A Divine invitation to costly grace. And which one of us when facing into a rather terrifying leadership position, would not want a double portion of our mentor's spirit, just as Elisha requests. Even that, my friends, Elijah the prophet doesn't promise Elisha. Instead, he calls Elisha to vigilance in faithful pursuit to his impending call as prophet.

One of the greatest joys and responsibilities of my vocation as priest is the mentoring of others along the way. To ask, even the youngest, to consider the vocation as an ordained leader in the church. You know, here at Reconciliation, I have the joy of inviting our children, youth, and adults to reflect on how God is calling you to serve the church, to serve the poor, the lost, the hungry, you meet along the various paths you travel... in schools, on playgrounds, on street corners, in offices, classrooms, and every place in between.

The times we live in provide us with plenty of opportunities to serve the hungry, the lost, the poor, the stranger, the oppressed and marginalized. What cost to

you are you willing to risk and to what extent are you willing to sacrifice of your very selves, to sacrifice not from reserves but from our very substance?

These are the questions not only implied in our first reading from second Kings but also these questions are at the very heart of our Gospel reading from Luke.

If you have read C.S. Lewis, then you know that at the turning point of his beloved *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, several significant characters encourage each other with reports that Aslan, the great lion and true ruler of oppressed Narnia, has reappeared to fight the evil witch. Their words of encouragement to each other are as potent as they are succinct, "Aslan is on the move."

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, something quite similar is happening in these verses. Having preached, taught, and worked miracles, Jesus suddenly hears his call to turn toward Jerusalem. And the rest of Luke's narrative depicts Jesus himself, being "on the move."

Included in the text this morning are two scenes: the first depicts Jesus' rejection by a Samaritan village and the anger of James and John. We hear that they actually call on Jesus to rain down fire from heaven to consume the villages. And we hear that Jesus refuses. Not long ago, in Luke's gospel, we hear Jesus describe what to do when one is not hospitably received as a disciple of the Good News. Jesus instructs his followers to shake off the dust from their sandals and have the peace return to those who would reject them. In this text we are to notice that nothing, not rejection, not inhospitable treatment would distract Jesus from his mission which was to make his way to Jerusalem. And Jesus remains true to his instruction, that no violence is ever to be the response made by his disciples.

We cannot, however, miss the sharpness of Jesus' varied responses in this text. His responses to those who would follow him, only first to attend to important things in their lives, like burying their dead. The urgency of Jesus' mission is clear. Nothing can stand in the way of his mission.

One commentator I read this week, wrote: (David Lose, *Feasting on the Word*)

Jesus recognizes that the journey to Jerusalem and the cross that waits there brook no compromise. To eschew violence, to embrace suffering for the sake of another, to refuse comfort, privilege, or status for the sake of fidelity to God's mission are, to say the least, countercultural; perhaps they even contrary to the natural human instincts for preservation, safety, and comfort. ... Those who would embrace Jesus and his mission must be under no illusions of what it will mean for them.

Yet I also wonder in my heart, about the state of Jesus' own heart. What must he, the human Jesus, be feeling at this very turning point in his ministry and mission? I can't help but wonder if that urgency to "turn his face to Jerusalem" isn't somehow fueled by his own terrifying awareness of what really awaits him? He knows there is no going back, no retreat from what is ahead for him and for those who follow him. And so he does not give into, perhaps his own human fears but keeps on, keeping on.

This Lukan narrative reflects the larger trajectory of this gospel that at its heart emphasizes Jesus' commitment to embrace the cross for the sake of the world, for the sake of Love, only Love. This is Jesus who is prompted by God's profound love for all humanity and for all creation that nothing can distract or deflect him from this mission. This sacred mission of Love.

My friends, this mission of Love is our mission. Jesus promised and we received an Advocate who accompanies us on our journey of discipleship. Are you and I willing to reject cheap grace and with the power of the Holy Spirit face into the challenges and possibilities of costly grace?

Even as we are in this "interim time" we may be tempted to "circle the wagons" and preserve our resources, storing them up for an unknown and unpredictable future. Well, we know what happened to the man who built barns to store up his reserves... Perhaps, enough said?

The texts before us today remind us that we have been given all we need to serve God's mission, today, tomorrow, and in all the days to come. What is needed, is a faith and trust in Jesus' promises and a generosity of spirit that anchors our

discernment of **God's** dream for us. This interim time is sacred time. It allows us to breathe deeply of the Holy Spirit, to review and re-set our hopes, expectations, and practices in the various ministries we hold as priorities in God's mission. And this interim time is an opportunity for new awareness to be discovered, new ideas to be tested, and deeper connections to be forged between and among us.

How are you being called in this interim time to pay attention to God's dream for you? What gifts might you offer to enrich this season of life at Reconciliation? Who might you engage in dreaming, mentoring, serving, praying?

May you and I be willing to risk everything for Jesus. To risk everything for Love, only Love.

Amen.