

ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

Luke 9:51-62

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Labor Day is a bittersweet day. At least it feels that way to me, because I've always loved summer. Even as a little girl growing up in hot Oklahoma, summer was my favorite season. Every August my grandmother would take me shopping for new school clothes. I remember distinctly how hot the air would feel in Oklahoma City. We would leave the store, she would open her car door and it was like stepping into an oven. Then my sweaty legs would stick to the plastic material on the car seat. Still, I loved summer.

When my children were young, we lived on Wolf Road in Bay Village. For years, there was a Renaissance Festival every Labor Day weekend in Huntington Park. We would walk down and have a wonderful time – seeing the crazy costumes, the sword fights, shopping at the craft tables, drinking lemonade, but there was a sadness hanging over the event; Labor Day signals the symbolic end of summer. Watermelon, fresh peaches and blueberries and tomatoes, sandals, swimming pools, long days. Goodbye until next year, as one season is ending.

We adjust to the change of seasons; other endings are harder. The end of a job or a career can be tremendously difficult. The ending of a season of life is sometimes stressful – many parents this month are coping with the realization that one phase of parenting is over as their children are off to school. Endings can remind us of our mortality. Certain windows close. Child-bearing years come to an end.

I have heard the great Christian writer and activist Tony Campolo speak – he is a passionate mission-minded person who also is blessed with a great sense of humor. He told this story one time. “I was talking to my wife the other day. I said, ‘now that I’m middle aged, I need to do some things differently...’” She interrupted me and said, ‘Tony, you’re not middle aged. You’re fifty-three years old. How many 106-year-olds do you know?’” Endings can be painful.

In our passage for today, Jesus is facing the most significant ending that any of us will ever have to face: the end of his earthly life. One can argue about what exactly Jesus knew, and when, and how, but this much is clear. Jesus knows that he must go to Jerusalem. The time has come to face his adversaries head-on, and he very well might not survive this confrontation with his political and religious enemies, all of whom are threatened by him, his message, and his popularity. Through Luke’s eyes, we see Jesus walking with determination: “He set his face to go to Jerusalem.” He’s walking with such focus that he walks right through the region of Samaria without stopping to talk to anyone.

Jesus marches on. The crowds start to follow, as they always do. They clamber for Jesus’ attention. “I’ll follow you, Jesus!” one person says. Jesus doesn’t sugarcoat what that means. “If you’re following me, you’re following someone who doesn’t have a home. Are you prepared for that kind of life?” Another one says, “I’ll follow you, Jesus, right after my father’s funeral.” Jesus answers, “When you sign up to follow me, my mission takes precedence over everything else.” (Even, presumably, a parent’s funeral. These are tough words. One commentator describes this passage as “words from cranky

Jesus.”) The final person says, “Jesus, I’m in – just as soon as I say goodbye to everyone back home.” And Jesus (cranky Jesus, if you like) says, “This not a time to say goodbye. This is a time to move forward.” Jesus marches on. Towards Jerusalem. Towards conflict. Towards his death.

We don’t know what was on Jesus’ mind, not exactly. But we do learn three things about him from this passage. First: Jesus lived with a complete focus on what God had called him to do. His entire attention is on his mission and purpose. Second: Jesus lived in the present moment. He didn’t dwell on the past nor did he worry about the future. If we have any control over our lives, that control is solely in the here and now. “What are you going to do today? How are you going to cope today?” Jesus knew that. And the third lesson is: Jesus knew he needed to be surrounded by strong people who would support him and not deter him. He needed to keep moving in the right direction; he didn’t want anyone around who would doubt or waver or try to steer him astray.

Jesus marches on, because his inner compass knows exactly where it’s going.

As we end one season and begin a new one, let me propose to you a spiritual practice. Perhaps you already do this. Perhaps you’ve done it in the past but have left it behind. I believe we could all benefit from this practice. Find time in your day to listen to what God is saying to you. Listening to God requires silence, so turn off the TV, the radio, the music, the phone and simply sit and listen. Set an alarm for five minutes to start with. You can gradually increase the time as you become more comfortable with the

practice, and with the silence. God wants to work in your life and through your life. The only way for you to know what that purpose is is to listen.

You might hear God telling you that it's time to end some things. Maybe it's time to end feeling sorry for yourself, or focusing on your faults, or blaming yourself or someone else for something in the past. Let that end. Maybe it's time to end feeling afraid or hateful or resentful. Let that end.

You might hear God telling you that it's time to begin some new things. Perhaps it's time to uncover a talent you've been hiding, to rekindle a relationship with a heart set on forgiveness, to live with more generosity and joy.

My own spiritual practice of meditation involves writing in a journal. I have done some journaling, on and off, for decades. But last fall, I restarted that practice in earnest. Most mornings I sit down with paper and pen and write three pages, longhand. It is a spiritual practice. It involves reviewing the prior day, writing down what I learned, recording moments of grace I experienced, noting gratitude, and it involves listening. Thought the past year, from time to time, one of the topics I've returned to is the loss of a close friendship. A person I used to be in regular touch with is now just a casual acquaintance, and it's been painful for me. One day last week, as I was sitting with my journal open, a verse from scripture came to my mind. "Love keeps no record of wrongs." It's part of I Corinthians 13. God could not have been speaking more clearly to me. "Let it go. Let your resentment end." It felt like a tremendous relief.

I want to thank all of you who were a part of my celebration last week. I am still a little shocked, humbled and overwhelmed by it all. As I was talking with the staff this

week, debriefing everything that happened and all the planning that had taken place that I wasn't aware of, Tim Schulz said, "Two things were very apparent Sunday. Not that we didn't know these things about you already. You don't like being the center of attention and you do like being in control." Guilty on both counts. And it's good for me to get out of my comfort zone.

But we can't always be in control; in fact, there are many things we can't control. Even Jesus couldn't control what happened in Jerusalem. I happen to believe that God chooses to not control life. Otherwise we would be puppets on a string. Life is chaotic and unsettled. Jesus calls us to walk with him, taking risks, throwing ourselves fully into this turbulent life, giving up the illusion of control, trusting that God will join us in the adventure, hold onto us through all of the ups and downs, and bring us in time to the other side.*

A new season is beginning, and it's a beautiful season in northeast Ohio: sunny days, crisp nights, apples and pumpkins and a game with a pigskin – I know it's a favorite season for many of you. We say goodbye to the old and walk into the new, striving to be fully present in this moment, and knowing that we are not alone.

*reference: David Lose, "Out of Control," workingpreacher.org