

A sermon preached by the Revd RL Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Third Sunday after Pentecost (6/30), 2019

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

In one of her more disturbing short stories, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Flannery O'Connor writes of a terrible murderer. Towards the end of the tale, the principle villain, a horrid man named by, Ms O'Connor, the Misfit, having overseen two brutal murders, prepares for a third, and, in the preparing, says,

Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead, and he shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and, if He didn't, there's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can - by killing someone or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness. (The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor, p.132)

O'Connor's are words remarkably reminiscent of the words of CS Lewis in *Mere Christianity* when he wrote to the effect that, if Jesus is not what he said he is, then he is simply a madman, but if he is what he said he is, then the only reasonable response is to fall at his feet and worship.

Both O'Connor's and Lewis's sentiments are powerful and deeply disturbing, for, if there is truth in them, they call us to be quite literal in our understanding of what we have heard in this morning's lessons.

In Kings, we hear the tale of Elijah, amongst the greatest of the Old Testament prophets, passing his mantle to Elisha and opening the path for a new holy man to oversee much of the life of the nation. The exchange, is anything but gentle or gradual. A mantle is passed...a hurried parental goodbye is given and a departure feast is quickly eaten...and off goes Elisha to a revolutionary new form of life.

Well, much the same is true in Luke's recounting of Jesus response to those who would come after him as he makes his way toward Jerusalem. In response to the enthusiastic, but somewhat naïve, willingness of three individuals to follow him, Jesus points out rather bluntly that to follow him is to risk having little of the material well-being the world takes fore-granted as essential to a reasonably lived life and requires a complete and overwhelming commitment to place the life he calls one to ahead of all the conventions that the world insists must be followed in order, again, for life to be reasonably lived.

Finally, Paul, in his typical extreme fashion, minces no words whatsoever in telling those who deign to follow Christ...who desire truly to be Christians...that all they need to know is that all wisdom...all truth...is wrapped up in the words, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"

His admonition is not that you should sort of do this...or pay lip service to it...or try to do it...but that you must do it...and, if you do not, if, rather, you bite and devour...you, yourself, will also be devoured.

He insists that there is no in-between...there is only this one hope for each of us and for the world.

He goes on...and it only gets more extreme. So very many things that, even to today, we take as modest failures on our part...behaviors upon which are often turned a blind eye...he insists will destroy us and can have nothing to do with the freedom for which Christ has set us free. In fact, Paul would insist that these very behaviors we, too often, take to be behaviors into which we are allowed occasionally to stumble, are those very things which enslave us and destroy the freedom Christ has conferred upon us. Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissention, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like. One would have to be deaf dumb, and blind to miss the fact that, the ancient world of Paul aside, these behaviors flourish about us now...right now...day in and day out...ceaselessly and increasingly...and are accepted simply as realities about which we can do nothing.

We might wish to respond, "Well, it's just the way things are," but Paul refutes that sentiment in his day as he would in ours by pointing out that there are other manners in which to live...manners comprised of...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...and these are the behaviors that actually give us the freedom and dignity bestowed upon us by our creator.

As I suggested, these are difficult readings...difficult concepts. They offer neither gentleness nor moderate demands if we think that we want truly to follow a path that offers true freedom...wholeness and health.

They call for a radical reassessment of how we are living our lives...what it is to which we are actually enslaved...what it is that we are truly prepared to give up and what sacrifice it is to which we would only pay lip-service when push comes to shove...what we are really willing to accept in our neighbor...not simply accept but cherish out of a simple regard for that person's dignity as a human being...what behaviors we would actually change...what modes of life we cling to for all we are worth that we would give up in order to find wholeness and dignity in our beings.

No, there is no manner in which to soften or moderate the picture painted for us this morning...because, in fact, as that benighted man named only the Misfit saw all too clearly, Jesus has, if he is who he claims to be and who we each swear him to be by nature of our baptisms, Jesus has changed everything...and life can never be the same.

On the other hand, if we actually want life to be different...if we are sick enough of the emptiness and pain inflicted by a world that promises us everything and then never quite seems to deliver on the promises...if we actually want life to be different...we have access to another path...we have not been left comfortless.

When we decide to take the step that sets us on that new path is ours, alone, to decide...grace will guide us once we have begun...and grace will lead us home...but we must decide what we want and if we will do whatever is necessary to move toward that reality.

God offers it to us. Health and wholeness and the peace that passeth all understanding awaits us. The path there is not an easy one, and it asks much, but it has been walked before...and will be walked with us now...by him who gave his life for us...that we might see a better way...and know a truth only he could show us.