

2019 06 30 Bauder WATER IS THICKER

WATER IS THICKER THAN BLOOD - Luke 9:51-62 June 30, 2019, St. Thomas Lutheran Church
Doug Bauder

When I first took a look at the gospel lesson assigned for this Sunday, my immediate thought was: Now I understand why Lyle chose to retire 2 weeks ago!

I mean who wants to preach on a text that seems to condemn the family just a few weeks after both Fathers' Day and Mothers' Day

Now I'm sure Lyle took his turn with this text in years past

And I know I've heard sermons on Luke 9:51-62 as I was growing up, but I honestly don't recall how others tried to make sense of Jesus strange words that seem to rebuke reasonable family relationships

Some commentaries center their thoughts on the first 3 verses of this text and suggest that what Jesus is doing in this portion of the story is condemning religious sanctioned violence, which was common in his day

those scholars concentrate on the reaction which the Samaritans had to Jesus passing through their town on his way to Jerusalem

Samaritans were a group of people who represented mixed blood lines – a people who had compromised Jewish culture

They were not, by and large, friends of the Jewish community (which is why when using the example of a 'good' Samaritan in one of his most famous parables, Jesus shocked the consciousness of his listeners)

When the Samaritans didn't welcome the disciples who had gone ahead of the others, James & John wanted to command fire to reign down upon them

It's as if the disciples are saying to Jesus "Hey boss, you want we should rough these guys up a little" to which Jesus responded NO – no fire, no brimstone, no violence

that's not the way Jesus worked...shake the dust off your sandals and move on

but, of course, that's not the most troubling part of this particular text

It's when Jesus responds to some individuals who seem interested in following him that we begin to scratch our collective heads

There are those who would argue that this text is basically emphasizing Jesus determination to fulfill his mission, as he understood it, despite what his disciples thought

Jesus was going to Jerusalem and he had a strong sense of what was going to happen when he got there

He knew that he had made enemies and that religious and secular leaders were out to get him

He was going to suffer and that was weighing heavily on his heart at this point in time, so his words to those who indicated a passing interest in following him while seemingly harsh, intense, even extreme, need to be understood in the context of the stress he was, no doubt, experiencing

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A third portion of this passage, concerns Jesus response to a would-be follower which seems downright cruel - "Let the dead bury their dead" he says

There are those who suggest that this is simply an example of Jesus using hyperbole or exaggeration to make a point

Jesus may even have been speaking to someone whose father was very much alive, years away from dying and that that prospective disciple was saying: "Once I'm on my own, I'll consider supporting your mission, but I have other responsibilities right now."

I'm reminded of a good man who was very active in the church I served in Green Bay, WI a number of years ago

He and his wife were both very active, but he had never joined the congregation

At some point, Dick indicated an interest in serving on the Board of Trustees (and he would have been an excellent member of the Board), but I had to remind him that there was this issue of him not being a member of the church and that was required if he planned to serve on the board

At which point, he reminded me that he had grown up Roman Catholic, that his mother was still living and that he couldn't possibly join a Protestant Church until she had passed

So, we have three jumping off points that could be used as sermon material today

- Violence is not the way Jesus would have us respond to opposition
- Standing up for one's beliefs may result in persecution, even suffering in some way
- Letting go of things from one's past might be the most important response to the call to discipleship

It's that third theme that I'd like to reflect on for just a few moments this morning

Jesus is making it clear in this passage that discipleship is a radical act – it could mean a major change in one's lifestyle, in one's way of thinking, in a person's commitments and, even in their relationships

And clinging to one's former way of doing things may not be consistent with serving God's kingdom, with responding to God's call

Even our commitment to our family is not meant to be an end in itself, he seems to be saying and that's a really difficult concept for me to swallow

But, what Jesus might be saying here is that every human relationship is a gift, including our relationship with our families, but that does not mean that families should be our only priority

Families are meant to guide us to be faithful in our most important relationship – our relationship with our Creator

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Here is how I have come to understand that truth – a part of my own story that very few of you probably know

When I moved to Bloomington in 1993, I had made a decision to bring to a close my career as a parish pastor

I also made the most difficult decision in my life and that was to move several hundred miles away from my teenage children whom I had helped to raise along with my former wife for a number of years after our divorce

I had determined that for my sake, and for theirs, it was important for me to live my life openly and honestly as the person I had come to understand myself to be – as a gay man

I chose to enter into a relationship with the person who I would, eventually, marry and I would do my best to support my son and my daughter from some miles away

I had no idea at that moment what doors might open for me, professionally or personally, but at a very deep level I felt I was responding to something spiritual – to a kind of calling, if you will

One of the first things I did when I moved to Bloomington, as I was seeking some kind of employment, was to find a community of faith

And I visited a half dozen congregations here in town looking for a place where my faith could be renewed from week to week, where my identity might be affirmed and where, if possible, I could serve that congregation in some way

I even applied for a position as an assistant pastor at a church here in Bloomington, but as pleased as they seemed to be with the experience I had to offer, they were not able to affirm my identity

So one door closed

And another one opened for me at the university to serve students in what I considered a most unique ministry...and, about the same time, I also found a church home at a place called St. Thomas

Over the 25 years in which I have been involved with this community of faith, opportunities to serve others in relationship with all of you have continued to unfold

Just two weeks ago you honored me by asking me to co-host Lyle's retirement, along with Kaye

Many years ago upon joining this congregation, I developed a wonderful relationship with another pastor of ours - Walt Johnson who served as a kind of spiritual mentor for me and I was honored to participate in his memorial service

I am privileged many Sundays to join my voice with some very talented people in this congregation who offer anthems of praise in worship as a member of our adult choir

I am invited to preach now and then when our pastor is away

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I have served as a sponsor for baptisms, officiated at several weddings, and conducted a funeral for a young gay man here in this sanctuary when the congregation in which he grew up refused his family the use of their sanctuary

You have welcomed my own children into worship here and a number of years ago supported my daughter and me as we travelled to Chichipate as part of our Sister Parish program

A year or two ago you listened as I shared in a sermon a letter I wrote to one of my grandsons as a take-off on the poem "Yes, Virginia There is A Santa Claus" entitled "Yes, Bailey, there is a spirit of Christmas"

You even agreed to hang a treasured symbol of my own faith tradition in this sanctuary during the Advent season so that I was able to remind Lyle this past Advent that, now, there were two Moravian stars in this church

Letting go of my past and listening to my heart has strengthened my relationship with God,
It has enabled me to use my gifts in ways I never imagined possible,
and, in fact, it has provided opportunities for me to grow in my relationship with my own children and my grandchildren over the years in unexpected ways

as I reflected on all that in recent weeks I came across the thoughts of a Karl Travis, pastor of the chapel at Duke University who wrote a sermon based on our gospel lesson today

I borrowed the title of **his** sermon for our reflections today

In his sermon he writes "Taken as a whole today's gospel lesson may be more about family than we realize and about how choices we make as we grow up can, actually build a more authentic family - a family much bigger than the one we define by biology

he continues by reminding us that our biological families were never meant to be an end in themselves

"The family Jesus is forging is the most beautiful family because it always points beyond itself to God. The finest families, he concludes offer their members a roadmap to God."

What he is saying here is that the act of our baptism is as important if not more important than the act of our birth (Water may, indeed, be thicker than blood)

I think back to my parents who regularly invited into our home, international students from our denominational college which was located in the town in which I grew up

there were students from Nicaragua and Honduras, from Jamaica and South Africa, from India and from countries in Europe who regularly spent time in our home, especially over the holidays

Only now do I realize what an important lesson I was being taught and how those lessons led me to an amazing crossroads in my own life – a way in which I sought to enlarge my own concept of family

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Psychologists tell us that every time we have a strong feeling about something and fail to act upon it, the less likely we are to act on it at all I definitely think there's some truth to that

Following Jesus' call to discipleship is unique for each one of us and it may change over the years of our lives

At times that call may simply be a sense of rightness in speaking out about something in which we fervently believe

Or it might be about making an important decision in our lives about a relationship to pursue or a career path to follow

Sometimes, that call might be in contrast to something we were taught when we were very young and that concept no longer seems to serve our sense of justice or truth

Most of us balk at letting go of the past, but "putting our hands to the plow and not looking back" is often exactly what God is calling each of us to do

I invite you, this morning, to consider
what it might be that God is calling **you** to act upon at this point in your life,
what decision **you** are being called to make,
what from **your** past you need to leave behind

As someone whose journey has been unique in many ways I believe it is often in just those moments of decision, that our lives can be transformed in ways we cannot begin to imagine

