

Hillcrest Congregational Church, UCC

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Be Not Distracted

2 Kings 2:1-3, 8-13, Luke 9:51-62

Be not afraid, I go before you always, come follow me and I will give you rest.

Be not afraid. Be not distracted. Not even by the petty fears that accost you. God has called you. Jesus has anointed you. Be not distracted from your destiny to testify to the overwhelming, unconditional love of God.

That is what I hear Jesus saying to us in the challenging words he has for three men today. To the man who says, "I will follow you anywhere," Jesus responded, "...the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To the man who says, "let me go and bury my father first," Jesus said, "Let the dead bury their own dead..." And to a third who asks, "let me go and say farewell, Jesus answered, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." These are challenging words. These are the words of a prophet.

It is no wonder that when Jesus asked his disciples, "who do people say I am?" they responded, "some say you are John the Baptist, some say Elijah some Jeremiah or another ancient prophet."¹ Challenging words come from prophets and everything Jesus is challenges us to take up his mantle and follow his Way.

And Jesus is not Elijah. There are parallels in their stories but also differences. Elijah called down fire from heaven to destroy the priests of Baal.

¹ Lk 9:18-19, Mt 16:13-14, Mk 8:27-28

But Jesus' compassion does not allow the disciples to do that to the unwelcoming village. Elijah did not die but was taken up by God in a whirlwind, showing the power of God defeats the power of Baal, god of Ahab and Jezebel. Jesus was crucified and died, but in resurrection, God defeated the powers of death itself.

Elijah called Elisha as his successor, but when it came time for Elijah to die, Elisha did not tell him what was going to happen, he told him to stay behind. Jesus called the disciples, but when it came time for Jesus to die, he said, "pick up your cross and follow me." Finally, Elijah gave Elisha three chances, and even though Elisha knew what was going to happen, he refused to stay behind. Jesus gave Peter three chances to acknowledge him, but he denied him three times.

And Peter is not the only one given the chance to follow Jesus. Jesus told all the disciples what was to happen to him. He told them how his mission of bringing the love of God, and the good news of the relationship they could have to the people would end. And in our reading today, he talks to three men who allow themselves to be distracted from following him.

Be not afraid. Be not distracted, not even by petty fears from your destiny to testify to the overwhelming, unconditional love of God. "What does it profit you if you gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit your selves?"

There are many distractions in our world. In the story we see Jesus challenge three of them. "The Son of God has no where to lay his head." It is as if

Jesus is saying- if you want a nice home, a comfortable life, a good income, don't follow me.

“Let the dead bury the dead.” Jesus is challenging the traditions that kept the people spiritually dead, that kept them from understanding and accepting the good news of God's unconditional love. He challenged the social and religious rules traditions of their time that constrained them from a relationship with God.

“No one who puts their hand to the plow and turn back is fit for the kingdom.” If we were to leave our homes and families, how long would it take to say good bye, to get our affairs in order? Jesus knew that if the third man went home to say farewell he would get distracted, procrastinate, even become afraid and find excuses not to follow and testify to the love of God.

We too are subject to distractions and fears. Our small churches face financial and membership challenges, competition from big mega-churches, cultural distractions that pull people away from church, and some truly difficult times of war and unemployment in our society.

Yet it is for times such as this we have been called. It is a time such as this when we must listen and act- Be not afraid. Be not distracted. Come follow me. Our religious traditions of intellectual challenge, heartfelt commitment, freedom of conscience, social justice, and a loving God are needed more than ever.

Here is how I know. Last week I went to a memorial for a truly great man. Mike was a fire chief who literally went around the world rescuing and teaching others how to rescue people from horrible disasters; every massive earthquake in the last 30 years, Oklahoma City, the Twin Towers, he was there. He was a loving, giving, caring, dedicated, fun and amazing man. There were 300 family and friends and over 100 firefighters present to thank God for his life.

But I left the memorial heart and soul sick. The message that I heard was that none of that was important. None of what he or the 400 people there did every day, the way they lived, was important. The only thing that mattered was whether or not he had been 'saved' and was going to heaven.

Now, don't get me wrong. The fact that Mike had a relationship with God that assured him of the peace that passes all understanding is very important. But Mike's life was also important. He lived his whole life, every day building, experiencing and living the kin-dom of God, heaven on earth. Everything about him testified to the love of God. His entire life was an example of how the love of God works in us, through us and with us.

What we know is that Jesus told us that heaven, that relationship, that love of God is for everyone and the amazing thing is we don't have to wait to die, it is here and now. Everyone is included, regardless of who they are or what they can do, they are loved as God's beloved child.

I told a friend I was preaching about testifying to the love of God and she asked me to share her story too. Tam is a woman dedicated to loving and serving God with her whole life. After years in a church where she was told what to think and how to believe, she realized she was gay. Based on what they said, Tam feared she would lose everything in her life- including her relationship with God. She wanted to die.

But the love of God intervened to tell her, nothing can separate her from the love of God. She understood for the first time that God loves her perfectly and that she lives within the grace of God. While she has lost her previous church, ministry, and friends, there is a new church, ministry, and friends. And they testify to a God who loves everyone, all the time, and in the most perfect way.

This is the message that our churches exist to bring to God's people. This is why Jesus told his followers, told us, to pick up our cross and follow. Jesus told us it would be hard. We could get distracted by the fact that we are small, that there are big churches competing with us, that we have so many other things in our lives that need attended to- family, friends, worldly goods, social and religious rules. But Jesus told us no one and nothing should distract us from following him and testifying to the love of God.

Elijah told Elisha three times to stay behind. But Elisha insisted on following and picking up the mantle. Jesus calls to us, once, twice, three times, a

thousand times. He will never give up on us. He wants us to pick up his mantle. Be not distracted. Be not afraid, I go before you always. Testify to the amazing, unconditional, overwhelming, already here and now love of God! Amen.