



**From the Pulpit: June 26, 2022**

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

**The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg**

Luke 9:51, 57–62

*To Bless the Space Between Us, II: Beginnings*

This summer we're preaching "To Bless the Space Between Us" based on a book by John O'Donohue.

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." Another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." And Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

"Sometimes 'No' is a mercy because it prevents us from tackling some mission we're not ready for or capable of"

The clueless guy says to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." But Jesus declines his application because this enthusiastic but naïve onlooker doesn't know what he's getting himself into. "Foxes have holes," says Jesus, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

Sometimes 'No' is a mercy. If I apply to become a Navy Seal, the Naval Recruiter, when he recovers from his bemusement, will wisely and gently turn me away, because the rigors of this demanding mission are way beyond me. Sometimes 'No' is a mercy because it prevents us from tackling some mission we're not ready for or capable of, like Jeffrey Clark trying to become the Attorney General of the United States.

Jesus taps a second candidate on the shoulder. The man says 'Yes' but says he has to bury his father first. Jesus famously and bluntly replies, "Let the dead bury the dead."

**W**e're barely a third of the way through Luke's long Gospel before Luke tells us that "when the days drew near for Jesus to be lifted up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

Jesus squares his shoulders, clenches his jaw, and strides purposefully toward the capital city of his archenemies—the Romans, the scribes, and the Pharisees.

Along the way, three erstwhile followers apply for the position of disciple. One is clueless, the second is grieving, and the third is sentimental.

Wow, harsh! True, the man doesn't tell **Jesus**, and Luke doesn't tell **us**, whether his father is already dead and all the man has to do is finish the funeral arrangements, or whether the father is 40 years old and might live another 30 years. Either way, Jesus is in a hurry and says, "Don't put off till tomorrow what you can do today."

A third man said, "I will follow you to Jerusalem, Jesus, but let me say goodbye to my family first." Jesus turns away discouraged and resumes his resolute journey to Jerusalem without this guy.

This is an unsettling text. According to Jesus, the demands of God's kingdom are immediate, comprehensive, and draconian. How is this text God's word for us today?

Maybe—just maybe—Jesus' saying "Let the dead bury the dead," is, as one scholar suggested, nothing but an ancient Palestinian hyperbole meant for dramatic effect and not to be taken literally.<sup>1</sup>

It's like "If your right causes you to sin, pluck it out," or "It's easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Ancient Palestinian hyperbole.

Or so let us hope, because I'm not sure I even **want** you to abandon obligations like family and profession and run instantly off to the seminary or the monastery or the streets of Calcutta like Mother Teresa or the Reichstag like Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

What I hope from this text is that you will hear the urgency in Jesus' voice as he pleases "Follow me to Jerusalem."

For someone here, that might mean instantly dropping what you're doing and going off to join the Peace Corps or Church World Service or The Night Ministry or joining Silvi or her successor on a Mission Trip, and if you're tempted to poke fun at Kenilworth Union Church for taking a mission trip to Hawaii, just remember that the Hawaii **they're** in isn't the Hawaii **you** travel to.

That's what it might mean for someone who hears Jesus today. For most of you, it will mean staying right where you are and using your position and your power and your energy and your experience to make sure that God's splendid kingdom redeems a broken world.

Someone here is just recovering from shock after the Supreme Court decision on Friday, but she is already planning what she can do to make sure that every American woman has complete access to reproductive health, personal autonomy, and complete control over her own body and destiny.

As I was thinking about people who work for God's splendid kingdom from wherever they are, my mind kept going back to Irma Garcia and Eva Mireles, the teachers who were killed in Uvalde in May. The loss of the children is incomprehensible and leaves me speechless, but I was thinking about the teachers, maybe because my daughter teaches second grade.

Eva was 44 years old and had been teaching for 17 years. Fifteen years ago, when Eva was a young woman and a new teacher, a third-grader named Gabbie entered her classroom. Gabbie has Down Syndrome and entered Eva's regular classroom

at a time when mainstreaming was new and fairly uncommon. Gabbie wore headphones in the classroom to block the noise and the distraction.

Eva taught Gabbie as if she were just one of the other students, when **that** was important, and gave her extra attention, when **that** was needed.

Gabbie is 23 now, and Eva stayed in touch with her through all those years till the day she died. Eva was so proud of what that third-grader had made of herself. It just made me realize how much America lost that day.

If we pay attention, every day we will hear whispers, hints, guesses, intimations of God's splendid kingdom. We may as well notice, learn, grow, and enlist in the cause.

I hate travelogue sermons and will spare you, mostly, but we visited Robben Island off Cape Town and the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg, where we witnessed the kingdom's assailants but also the kingdom's refusal to die or disappear.

"What I hope from this text is that you will hear the urgency in Jesus' voice as he pleases 'Follow me to Jerusalem.'"

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<sup>1</sup> R. Allen Culpepper, *The Gospel of Luke*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, eds. Leander Keck, et. al., (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), vol. IX, p. 216.

Nelson Mandela and Cape Town Archbishop Desmond Tutu were probably the two most prominent South African kingdom workers sledgehammering away at the monstrosity of apartheid for decades.

Archbishop Tutu loved to tell a joke about a South African and a Zambian boasting about their respective homelands. The Zambian says, "I know the Minister of the Zambian Navy!" The South African says, "Zambia is landlocked and doesn't even have a Navy," and the Zambian replies, "Well, South Africa has a Minister of Justice, right?"<sup>2</sup>

We met Christo Brand, one of Mr. Mandela's prison guards at Robben Island. Today Mr. Brand acknowledges that he was slow and late in owning up to his personal contribution to apartheid, but over the years, Christo and Nelson formed a friendship.

Christo told us that for his 60th birthday, Nelson Mandela received 35,000 birthday cards. The Robben Island warden threw every one into the furnace.

We saw the limestone ledges which are so white they blind in the South African sun. Mr. Mandela's hard labor was to chisel off chunks of the limestone and chip them into dust. There was no purpose to this task; they just threw away the limestone. When the prisoners asked for sunglasses to protect their eyes, they were denied; Mr. Mandela's eyesight was never the same.

Still, friendships formed between guards and inmates. Christo Brand's wife baked legendary fruitcakes every Christmas, so one year he asked her to bake some cakes for his fellow guards. Christo gave them to the inmates instead. This went on for years.

One Christmas after Mr. Mandela was released from prison in 1990, he called Mrs. Brand to thank her for the fruitcakes over the years. She had no idea what he was talking about. All this time, she thought she was giving presents to the guards. Still, she baked him a cake every year till the day he died.

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus calls out, "Follow me." I don't know what your answer will be or what it will mean. Maybe it will mean that you'll drop what you're doing and travel to some distant and dangerous place like Jerusalem.

Or maybe it just means you'll stay where you are and do what you can to build and expand God's splendid, urgent, irreplaceable kingdom—loving the unloved, befriending the friendless, showing grace to the ungracious, freeing the captive, and reaching out to the least, the last, the lost, the lame, the leper, and the loser.

*"That's what it might mean for someone who hears Jesus today. For most of you, it will mean staying right where you are and using your position and your power and your energy and your experience to make sure that God's splendid kingdom redeems a broken world."*

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Glenn Frankel, "Desmond Tutu, Exuberant Apostle of Racial Justice in South Africa, Dies at 90," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2021.

—Prayers of the People—  
The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

You are our shepherd, O God, our rock, our fortress.  
You are our peace, our light, our salvation.  
To you, we bring our whole lives,  
every worry and hope,  
every longing and love.  
We trust your abiding presence,  
and lay down our lives in the shelter of your love.

You are majesty, mercy and mystery.  
Before your throne of grace,  
we bear our ache to begin again,  
our yearning for another way,  
our longing for another chance.

We feel Our collective action,  
our scramble for justice,  
our attempts to advance peace  
and champion mercy feel as if they have failed again.

We count our own imperfections,  
even as we acknowledge  
that the weight of the world's injustice  
was long ago too much even for you to bear, O Christ,  
your divine attempts to let love win foiled by the cross.

Even when we are ready and willing  
to struggle for justice,  
even when we don't succumb to complacency,  
the task is impossible at best.

So, be our balm in Gilead.  
Hear our weeping.  
Strengthen us in our commitments.  
Buoy us in the storm.  
Prepare us for a way ahead.

Let us believe again,  
In the beautiful complexity of this life.  
Welcoming something beyond Black and White,  
Something beyond binary, something more gray,  
Something that might flourish and grow,  
And become healed and healing.

You are Holy Incarnate Mystery,  
Holy Incarnate Word,  
Holy Abiding Spirit, and we need you.  
We need you to hold the mystery of this life,  
for we think we see the path ahead,  
and then the landscape changes again.

We need you in our trouble,  
when anxiety unsettles us,  
when we lose sleep and get flustered,  
when the butterflies in our stomach  
cannot and will not settle.

We need you to hold the mystery,  
for there is more here to unfold than we can see,  
there is more life to come than we can know,  
there is, in you, an inexhaustible spirit,  
teeming with hope,  
where tears can be wiped away,  
and sorrow can be held,  
and the worst kind of worry can be sorted.

Give us the capacity to make space for your spirit,  
for under the banner of your love,  
we know that there is life, there is freedom,  
there, we can live and move and have our being.

Bind us together, O God, with a transcendent joy,  
just beyond the edges of our sorrow,  
so that we can walk even the most impossible path,  
and the fire will not consume us.

Be with us O God, and hold us in your arms of love.

Our Father.... Amen.

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