

Sermon for June 27, 2010
The Rev John A. Baldwin

God doesn't seem to like those who hesitate and look back. That is an interesting assertion in this morning's Gospel. Reflecting on the multitude of excuses people offer for not becoming his disciples (both back in his time & even today), Jesus warns, "Once the hand is laid on the plow, no one who looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God."

God's displeasure with people who look back is expressed even more dramatically in the Book of Genesis, chapter 19. Though clearly warned by God not to look back, the wife of Abraham's nephew Lot does just that as her family is fleeing from Sodom & Gamorrah. In doing so, she is turned into a pillar of salt. Why is God so harsh on those who look back?

What's at stake in these and other stories, I believe, is the critical importance of pursuing matters of faith with single-minded devotion & determination, without wavering or hedging our bets. It also means having the courage to let go of the things that chain us to our past.

For Jesus, the Kingdom of God is the ultimate goal towards which all his disciples are to work with unflagging devotion. It's a kingdom in which justice, compassion & peace are the norm, and in which tyranny, hatred & malice are put to flight. It's a dynamic vision for a world filled with strife.

Sadly, far too many of Jesus' disciples in the 21st century have misunderstood his vision of the Kingdom of God as existing only in the heavenly realms....a place where personal piety will be rewarded after death and where believers, having passed through the stress of daily living, will be able to escape the sins of the world and receive a crown of glory.

But when Jesus told stories about the Kingdom of God, he did not talk about angels & archangels, seraphim & cherubim. He spoke about the Kingdom in very earthy metaphors: The Kingdom is like a man who went out early to hire laborers for his vineyard; the Kingdom is like a mustard seed; it's like a treasure hidden in a field, or like a merchant in search of fine pearls. Jesus taught his disciples to pray: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven." In answer to the Pharisees question about the time of the Kingdom's coming, Jesus replied, "the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Jesus proclaims a vision of a world made new & transformed by love & devotion to God. This is what he urges his disciples to devote their hearts & souls to attaining. He wants his disciples to be actively involved in changing this world.....taking risks... loving & serving others with our whole being....standing up for our beliefs. He does not want his disciples to compromise with evil, but to hold fast to that which is noble & true. Jesus is impatient with those who offer excuses....who hesitate to commit themselves to working for the coming of the Kingdom. These folks aren't necessarily bad people, they simply lack the will and the courage to commit themselves to things of ultimate importance. They look backwards toward the safe, the secure & the known. They shy away from the tough risky...yet exciting work of advancing God's Kingdom.

But aren't we all (to a greater or lesser degree) just like those who look back and hesitate? How often do we stand up for our beliefs, especially when they involve discomfort, or hassle? I'm not just talking about the major issues of our day: hunger, fear, peace, racism and social justice. I'm also talking about the day to day issues in which we are tempted far too easily to hesitate, compromise & not speak out or witness to our beliefs.

Let me offer you a personal example: A mile down the road from the parish where I served as Rector for 6 years in suburban Washington, DC. was the Oxon Hill Rental Company. Out in front of the store was a large sign used by management to post signs & messages. Every time I drove past the company I felt offended by the messages, which were nearly always radically political in nature, often suggesting violence as a means to an end. My deeply held belief that we are called as Christians to be peacemakers led me to a determination not to patronize the company.

And yet, one Saturday when a group of parishioners removed an old air-conditioning unit from behind the parish hall, I was faced with a dilemma. We required a metal-cutting saw on short notice, and alternatives to the Oxon Hill Rental Company meant inconvenience and added expense. Principle gave way to expediency. I was further embarrassed when the company gave a generous discount to the church. Now I suspect that this action did not significantly set back advancement toward the Kingdom of God, but I offer it as but one small example of how easy it is to compromise & let one's convictions slide.

The metaphor Jesus uses to warn of the dangers of hesitation & looking back in this morning's Gospel is a useful one. Plowing a field, particularly in the rocky hills of Galilee is a very difficult task. A keen eye, a steady hand & focused concentration are necessary. A glance backward can mean hitting a stone & bending your plow, or running across a previously plowed furrow and undoing some of the work you've done before.

I remember watching a group of Peace Corps volunteers learning to plow in a field outside Putney, Vermont some years ago. For an observer it was quite funny. The volunteers tripped over their feet as their ox swayed back & forth. They lost control of the plow and made furrows that looked more like snakes than straight lines. They flopped down with exhaustion when they reached the end of the field. They knew well the dangers of looking back. But over time, I imagine, they came to an awareness of the rewards that come from concentration and the determination to succeed.

The meaning of this metaphor for those of us who accept God's bidding to new life and purpose is that faithful discipleship requires dedication. The rewards of following Jesus Christ and working for the coming of God's Kingdom do not come easily through half-hearted measures and limited commitment. They emerge instead out of lives characterized by sacrifice, determination and self-giving love.

Those who look back are hindrances to the coming of the Kingdom. They stand immobile, luke-warm and bewildered. They get in the way. What the Kingdom does need are committed and loving workers who are not content to sit back and ignore the needs of the world, but who are willing to undertake difficult & risky ventures so that God's will may be done on Earth as it is in heaven.

St. Paul best sums up the attitude of a person who puts the past behind & embraces the possibilities of what lies ahead when he writes in his Epistle to the Philippians: "All I can say is this: forgetting what is behind me & reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press on towards the goal....to win the prize which is God's call to the life above in Christ Jesus."