

## Christina Smerick

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

I love the lectionary. I love the structure, the way it keeps us from picking and choosing our own favorite verses and cobbling together a Frankenstein scripture that says what we want it to say. By juxtaposing texts we wouldn't necessarily read together, it challenges us to address the entirety of Scripture in our study and to be led to see the creativity of God in this juxtaposition. But I go to tell you that I kind of wish we were reading all of Luke 9 at once, because there is a theme here that builds, and that goes straight to Galatians and is expanded by that text, and that even goes back to Elijah and Elisha, if we have eyes to see. There's a theme building here about what it means to follow Jesus, if you don't mind the cliché. And we need to hear it, again and again, because it is so counter-intuitive, it is so against our instincts of self-preservation and our instincts of justification by any means necessary (rather than justification by faith, good ole holiness joke there) that all we can hope to do is repeat, repeat, repeat, and pray that through grace it sinks in. And I know that I have COR 401 on the brain, but I think it also speaks directly to our money-obsessed culture and how we are to interact with it without allowing it to dominate us.

So if you'll indulge me, I'd like to just give a brief summary of Luke 9:

1. Mission of the 12: I love this passage. A few years ago, our Christian Life week speaker preached on this passage and I had one of those conviction moments, which is what I look for in a sermon. It's worth reading as a whole: "Then Jesus<sup>1</sup> called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases,<sup>2</sup> and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.<sup>3</sup> He said to them, 'Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic.<sup>4</sup> Whatever house you enter, stay there, and leave from there.<sup>5</sup> Wherever they do not welcome you, as you are leaving that town shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.'<sup>6</sup> They departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere." What to pull from this? We are to proclaim the good news and to heal. And we're to do it in a very vulnerable state, without presents to bribe people with, or an army to impress them and protect us, or bags of money with which to tempt them... We are to heal, and to do so in a state of radical vulnerability to those we come to help. We are to be at their mercy.
2. Loaves and fishes: we know this story quite well. Jesus comes to heal and proclaim the good news (which is what he charged the 12 with...). And then he feeds people. From little he creates much. Not, note, from an abundance, but from a little.
3. Peter tells Jesus he is the Messiah; Jesus tells them not to tell anyone that. So what is the good news, if it is not that Jesus is the Messiah? What message are they to

proclaim? It's an interesting question. When we get so focused upon "Jesus died for your sins" as the message, we forget that Jesus and the disciples were preaching the good news before that happened. And that Jesus commands them not to tell people he's the Messiah... Instead, from these passages we are presented with Jesus the healer, not Jesus the conqueror of Romans. Jesus tells them that he is called to suffer and die...this is not the image we want to be in imitation of, now is it. We like the "every knee shall bow" image.

4. My favorite passage when I want to freak myself out: "deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." What the what.
5. The Transfiguration.
6. Jesus heals a boy with convulsions.
7. Jesus again foretells his death.
8. Greatness: "the least among you is the greatest of all."
9. \*\*Jesus says "whoever is not against you is for you." How often do we perceive ourselves as persecuted, with the world against us? What if we had this attitude toward all we meet, instead of an attitude of suspicion?
10. Jesus does not call fire and brimstone down upon people who reject him. Think back to Luke 1—our response to rejection is to 'shake the dust from our sandals.' That's a far cry from setting fire to an entire village, eh? The possible reason why the Samaritans reject Jesus here is because he is going to Jerusalem, and the Samaritans favored their own temple at Mt. Gerezim (and weren't allowed to help rebuild the Temple, so you know...grudges die hard).
11. Our passage today: What strikes me about this is that Jesus does not make it easy to follow him. It is in striking contrast to the pabulum often offered by certain evangelical movements, whereby anyone and everyone simply has to 'ask Jesus into one's heart' and be saved. I've often felt that in our push to spread the good news, we have failed to acknowledge that the good news is hard news to take. We're a part of this world that is so often sinful and broken, and therefore following Jesus may not be that simple at all, but rather may ask of us to leave home and family, or to pursue a lifestyle that looks to the world like failure, or may run against even those values that the typical 'Christian' promotes so avidly: FAMILY values. Not burying your own father; not even saying goodbye to your mother or wife—doesn't sound like focusing on the family there; going out into the world without an army or bearing gifts; and trying to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom of God, a kingdom that one must await, not force into being, yet one that we're supposed to live out in our lives as if it has really arrived. This is not just asking Jesus into your heart. And I think that we all too often forget this, at our peril, and

at the peril of those we may be witnesses to. In the Jewish tradition, if one wants to convert, one must be ritually rejected 3 times by the rabbi...because becoming Jewish should be hard, it will be hard, you will have to live by rules that the majority of the world thinks are stupid and outdated; you are linking yourselves to a people who have been on the losing side of history for over 2000 years; you are taking on the burden of a priesthood that you don't need to take on. I wonder if perhaps we should be more honest about the kind of life we're called to as Christians...

12. Which leads us to Paul. The immediate thing that might spring to mind right now is, wait a minute, she's babbling on about Judaism but our texts explicitly state our freedom from the Law, so come on! What orthodox Jews have to do in order to remain righteous doesn't apply to us. Oh, so true. And our Galatians passage skips the really fun part where Paul calls for those who tell the Galatians they should be circumcised to be castrated! One assumes he's kidding. J But just look at the list Paul gives us. These are not easier things to do than the Law; in fact, these are things that Paul seems to admit are fairly impossible to pull off in a community without the Spirit of God. And this isn't the charismatic Spirit that will come crashing in and uplift us all in a state of emotional rapture...this is that still small voice we heard about last week, that nudge, that breath that gently pushes us toward love and patience and away from anger and spite. This is the passage that Christians who are still in the Victorian era and thus obsessed with sex focus on; those who are obsessed with booze also like this one, and conveniently ignore that fact that Paul is not calling for abstention here but from a kind of behavior. In fact, all of the things we are to avoid are behaviors, not the flesh itself. And people tend to skip over the items that actually, you know, apply to them: anger, strife, enmities, envy, jealousy, quarrels, dissensions, factions...most of the list.

So we're given a picture from Luke 9 and Galatians of the kind of life Jesus and Paul have us aiming for. It is a life that rejects using materiality to impress and convert people. The contrast between a mega church and a tunic upon one's back couldn't be more obvious. It is a life that opens one to rejection—and one's response to that rejection should not be anger or punishment, but a remaining vulnerable, a patient love. It is a life that may buck even the traditional family structures and rules that polite Christian society calls for. It is a life that requires us to be guided by small, still, quiet voices, into behavior that is really not natural for us. And yet, Paul calls this freedom. Which is another way Scripture bucks the system. First, Jesus rejects all the typical signs of power and dominion in favor of healing and self-sacrifice. Then, Paul uses our favorite American word, a word we've attached to invasions of other countries, Chevy trucks, and fried potatoes to describe a life that sounds anything but free. If there's a word that screams USA it is "FREEDOM". Go ahead and picture Mel Gibson yelling it now. "They can take our lives..." Well, in Paul's usage of the term, yeah—your life is taken. And that is freedom. In freedom, in Christ, we are to be slaves to one another. Oh, that doesn't sound very American at all. That sounds bad. I don't want to be someone's slave, even one of you nice people here. How in the heck is there freedom in being a slave?

Obviously, by freedom Paul does not mean free to do whatever I want. Which is often how we define freedom in this country—as a lack of restrictions, a license to do what we want, a ‘no one can tell me how to live’ kind of freedom. But Paul is explicitly telling us how to live in this passage, and it is a very restricted way of living. But we’re free. Free from what, exactly? Well, Paul’s initial message is freedom from the Law—not that the Law is bad or we shouldn’t keep it, but that sense in which it is only through the Law that we are saved. (Now I have a bone to pick with this interpretation of the Law, but that’s for classtime not preaching time). You don’t have to keep the minutiae of the law; and simply being circumcised and then doing what you want is certainly not the way...but you know, you probably should “Love your neighbor” which is the whole and the spirit of the Law. SO it’s not a get out of jail free card as much as it is a change-up in motivation. Rather than keeping the law out of fear, keep the heart of the law out of love. We are free from the law’s demands, but in that freedom we should willingly embrace its restrictions when it comes to treating other people. If we need an example of steadfast love, ironically, we find it in an Old Testament prophet. Elijah’s method of firebombing the Baal priests is rejected by Jesus; Elisha is the one we are to look to here, Elisha who follows Elijah regardless of the distance and in spite of being told not to; Elisha who willingly take the mantle from his mentor, knowing that it entails suffering and hardship and being run out of town on a rail at best. Elisha remains faithful when the going gets tough, and he loves. Doesn’t that passage just break your heart? In Elisha we have a model of being a slave to another in freedom; of following with only a tunic upon one’s back; of remaining steadfast even into the wilderness. This freedom is not a freedom from , but a freedom to—a freedom to love via the gift of the Spirit; a freedom to live in joyous hope of a kingdom that is already and not-yet; a freedom to live as-if that kingdom has already arrived because, in one way, it has. One is not bound to the Law, but one can now choose to be bound to the law of agape, a ‘law’ that is exemplified for us in the life of Jesus, a ‘law’ that sets us free not for ourselves, but in order that we may love others more deeply, selflessly, patiently, truly. This law of agape may call for us to act in ways that, from the outside, don’t look like filial duty—don’t look like the kind of philia that the family requires (the two-way street). But what it does call us to is a way of living in the world with the Spirit of God beside us and before us, a living in the world as if the coming Kingdom has arrived. And that is good news indeed.