

What God Wants For You
Luke 9:51-62
Preached by Rev. Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 27, 2010

If you could, what would you list as the four or five most important things you would want for your family and friends?

My list is by no means conclusive, you may have better suggestions, but here it is, not necessarily in order of importance:

First, our loved ones would always be safe. We live in a dangerous world with terrible accidents, crime and terrorism. You never know what might happen. So, naturally we want our loved ones to be safe from danger and evil.

Second, we want our loved ones to be healthy. Whenever there's a birth we instinctively pray for a healthy baby. We want our children to be physically, emotionally and spiritually whole, blessed with good health and a long life.

Third, we want our loved ones to be blessed with prosperity, never wanting for any of life's necessities and able to secure at least some of the luxuries so they can enjoy the good life.

Fourth, our loved ones would be personally fulfilled, that is they'd be blessed with a divine purpose, able to recognize we've been put on this earth to enjoy God, the world around us and the Kingdom within us.

Summing up here are the four basic things:

1. Be safe
2. Be healthy
3. Be prosperous and
4. Be fulfilled.

These are decent hopes. We're not asking for anything excessive. None of these hopes ask for a competitive edge at the expense of others. They're things we're encouraged to pray for. And yet, when you take these four reasonable requests and place them in the context of today's gospel lesson you sense a built in tension between what we hope for and Jesus' basic requirements of discipleship.

Let's review Jesus' pronouncements about discipleship. To the man who gushed out "**I will follow you wherever you go,**" Jesus warned "**Foxes have**

holes, birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no where to lay his head."

To another who wanted to first fulfill his family obligations Jesus declared, **"Let the dead bury their own dead."** And finally, to the third who wanted to first go home to say goodbye to his family Jesus retorted, **"No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the Kingdom of God."**

It seems Jesus is flunking the family values test. So what do we make of this? Are we mistaken? Are safety, good health, prosperity and personal fulfillment out of sync with God's kingdom? Or are there things we haven't considered?

Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish philosopher wrote **"Suppose we get to the end of life only to discover that the things we sought to avoid the most, namely pain and suffering are the real pathways to eternity."**

The things we desire for our loved ones guarantee their happiness and welfare. But if Kierkegaard's right, then there's more to life than safety, health, prosperity and fulfillment. In fact, maybe just the opposite guarantees life. Somehow pain and suffering should be included, but who would wish pain and suffering on a loved one? And yet, read the scriptures and find pain and suffering, especially when the result of sacrifice, are in some hidden way the real pathways to eternity.

Jesus came into the world to show us those things we think are important really aren't. At the same time, what we seek to avoid that may bring pain and suffering are really meant to be embraced.

We see the willingness to embrace pain and suffering demonstrated in Jesus' life.

In the first verse of today's lesson we read, **"When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up he set his face to go to Jerusalem."**

Jesus was born to die for the sins of the world and the time was coming to face his destiny. That phrase, **"he set his face to go to Jerusalem,"** says it all. When Jesus accepted he had to be crucified, he let go of any desires for safety, health and self-fulfillment. In fact he actively courted the opposite. He surrendered his safety and made himself vulnerable. He surrendered his health when he let his persecutors abuse his body. He already gave up any desire for personal prosperity by making himself poor and instead of fulfilling his life, he emptied himself for everyone, even those who killed him.

Maybe now you appreciate Jesus' curt answers to those who put conditions on discipleship. To the one who thought he was ready Jesus discerned he was too eager and hadn't counted the cost. Foxes and birds have their safety nets, but Jesus was on a collision course with the danger, so to that person Jesus said, "**Are you sure you want to risk even being seen with me?**"

To the son who promised "**As soon as my father is buried I will come and be with you,**" Jesus was equally abrupt. Very likely the father was healthy. "**Let me bury my father**" was a Middle Eastern idiom for "**I must first take care of my family obligations, but as soon as it is convenient, I'll be there.**" Jesus' point was "**I need you now and what's more you need me! Don't waste precious time, follow me today!**"

And finally to the one who promised, "**I will follow you, but let me first say goodbye to my family.**" Jesus realized that one would go home and stay there. "**You can't plow a straight line if you keep looking back.**" In other words once you accept the discipleship life style you can't pine away for "the good old days."

Apparently "what we want" seems to be on a collision course "with what God wants." So are our prayers for our loved ones safety, health, prosperity and self-fulfillment not of the Kingdom? And does that mean once you follow Jesus all these hopes go out the window?

Not at all, remember what I said earlier you can find scriptures giving support to each one. At the same time, once you seriously begin following Jesus, these four hopes must be put in the context of Christ's teachings so our prayers for safety, health, prosperity and fulfillment don't compromise our call to discipleship.

Here's what I mean. Take safety first. Of course God wants us to be safe, but there's the danger of us playing it too safe. Jesus could have played it safe. One word to Pilate and Jesus would have been a free man. But he didn't. Forsaking his personal safety he remained true to his calling. How often are we tempted to play it too safe at the expense of your integrity? Remember what Jesus said, "**Those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life, for my sake will save it.**"

Simultaneously our hopes for health are in keeping with the kingdom, as long as your quest for health isn't pursued at the expense of everything else. The old adage, "**If you have your health you have everything,**" is a lie. Physical health shouldn't be the primary criteria for wholeness. There are some folks who have terrible health but still live beautiful lives. At the same time, there are people in great shape physically but they are spiritually sick. All the health foods, regular exercise and vitamins in the world can't save your soul.

Again Jesus' teachings bring us back to reality, **"If your eye is healthy your body is full of light, but if it is not healthy your body is full of darkness."**

Then there's that desire for prosperity. Having enough, even having a few luxuries is also compatible with discipleship as long as we don't pursue wealth for its own sake. Making a good salary, having a good home, providing for our families are all good as long as it doesn't replace your need for God. Material wealth and possessions are sacred gifts to be appreciated and shared. Committing a portion of your wealth to the work of the Kingdom and giving liberally to worthy causes reminds us prosperity shouldn't be an end in itself. Again, Jesus kept us on the straight and narrow in his parable of the rich fool: **"This very night your soul is required of you. All the things you have amassed what good are they to you now? So it is with those who store up riches for themselves, but are not rich toward God."**

Finally, the quest for personal fulfillment. Is there a time when self-fulfillment runs counter to Christian discipleship? In a word, yes. Self-fulfillment without being moored in the Gospel becomes narcissism. But true fulfillment is found by emptying yourself and putting others first by being servants to each other. In Jesus' own words, **"just as the son of man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many."**

We began by listing what we would want for our loved ones, then what Jesus wants from us and finally concluded what we want and what God wants can be reconciled if you set your face towards your own Jerusalem.

This can be neatly summed up in what Jesus said, **"Seek first the kingdom of God and all its righteousness and everything else will fall into place."**

May God grant us the blessings we need and then give us the wisdom to see our blessings through the lens of discipleship as we follow Jesus confidently and joyfully serving him and each other every day and in every way.