

Proper 8-C
June 29-30, 2019
St. John's Cathedral

My father, when he was procrastinating about some project or decision, or just dragging his feet a bit, was fond of saying he intended to do those things "a week from some Thursday." It was his way of saying he'd get around to it eventually, but not right away. There was usually a little eye-rolling when he said that, but we knew what he meant.

My father was not unique in this way. I'd guess that most of us have put things on the back burner for a time – sometimes a very long time. Some of those are probably things that could easily be relegated to a waiting list, but others might be important decisions or commitments. Things that just sort of sit there waiting to be acted on – maybe a week from some Thursday.

I thought about that this week as I spent some time with the scripture readings for today – and especially the Old Testament and Gospel readings, because both of them show us some foot-dragging when someone was asked to follow God's call. These stories occur hundreds of years apart, but have a common theme.

In First Kings, Elijah, the powerful prophet of his time in the ninth century before the Christian era, was nearing the end of his ministry. God tells him to find Elisha, a younger man, and anoint him as his successor.

He finds Elisha out in a field with his oxen, bringing up the rear of a group of 12 teams of oxen that were plowing. You can almost see the dust as these oxen moved along. Elijah threw his mantle over Elisha – a heavy cloak – likely made of sheepskin-- that was a symbol of his status as a prophet. His intent was, as we sometimes say, to 'pass the mantle' to Elisha who would serve as God's prophet when the time came.

Elisha ran after Elijah to say he would follow him, but not right away – not until he could say good-bye to his family. This did not sit well with Elijah, who said, sharply, “ Go back again for what have I done to you? In other words, Are you really serious about this call? You have a choice here.

Elisha goes back home, but only for a little while. When he departs he makes it clear that he is leaving by killing the oxen and boiling them up as kind of a farewell feast for his family, then returns to follow Elijah.

Elisha’s hesitation is real and perhaps familiar. It is as if he needs to think things through --- settle things on the family front as he prepares to answer a call to be a prophet – a challenging future.

To go or not to go. To ask for a little time to think it over – or to plunge right in. Perhaps we have had those kind of moments – no doubt on a smaller scale. How do we sort them out?

The second story, from Luke’s gospel comes at a kind of turning point in the gospel as Jesus ‘turns his face toward Jerusalem.’ In other words, he is heading toward the place where he will suffer and die. This is a section of the gospel where we encounter both the love of Jesus and his compelling call as well as some of the real demands of discipleship. We hear some of this in the reading today and will continue to hear more in the coming weeks. So fasten your seat belts!

Jesus almost sounds gruff here. He more or less tells one prospective follower that the journey ahead would be no picnic – as if he’s warning that the path could be a rough one. Another man wants to follow, but not until he buries his father. It may have been that his father had died recently and he wanted to go to the funeral, but it also possible that the man simply wanted to postpone becoming Jesus’ follower for practical reasons until sometime in the future after his father had died. Jesus’ response to him is also a gruff one. Let the dead bury their own dead. A third man wants to follow, but also wants to go home first and say good-bye. He, too, is rebuked.

Urgency is probably the key word here as Jesus has no time for those who have better things to do here than work immediately for the reign of God. It is clear here that Jesus demands a greater and more decisive commitment than these prospective followers seem willing to give.

These stories are here not just to narrate the journey, but to challenge us with the demands of our own discipleship – the way we follow Jesus. This isn't about garden variety procrastination like when we put off painting the house or cleaning the garage. This is about what we do with our lives – how we are followers of Jesus in our own time. What does it look like for each of us—whatever shape our life takes – to live into the values and the demands of the reign of God? Now. Not a week from some Thursday.

This got me thinking about the many ways we live out our call to follow Jesus amid the everyday circumstances of our lives. And those opportunities are almost limitless.

I've served on the Commission on Ministry in our diocese several different times over the past 35 years or so. That commission's job is to help people sort out their call to serve God either as people living into the call of their baptism in everyday life (what we used to call lay ministry) or perhaps a call to ordained ministry. One of the ways we do that is to provide ways to sort this out in a local discernment group that talks and prays and imagines about what our ministries might look like. We have had a few of those here at the cathedral over time. Will we live that out by being one who comforts the suffering? One who advocates for the poor? One who is a superb parent or grandparent? One who invites people to church? One who becomes a leader in a church community or the wider community? Or any number of other ways we might serve.

One of the interesting things over the years has been to see how the age when people seriously explore a call to ordained ministry – particularly the ministry of deacons – has gotten older. When Barbara Novak and I prepared to be deacons, we were in our twenties and ordained in our

early thirties. Right now, all of our deacons in the diocese are in their sixties, seventies or eighties. Very few people in younger generations seem to be exploring this opportunity to serve. None is in the pipeline right now.

Being a deacon is a wonderful thing. We experience them every week in the liturgy, reading the gospel, forming the prayers, serving communion, dismissing us from the Eucharist and occasionally preaching. But this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Deacons are really among us to be icons of servanthood. That means they are people who not only serve, but also encourage all of us to discover and live into ways of serving God in our community, in our church in our neighborhood, our world. That's one reason we see Deacon Dave Walker coordinating our work with Family Promise, a ministry that provides a place to stay in our building for families seeking homes and jobs. That's why deacons dismiss us from the Eucharist every week to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

I'm curious why younger people aren't captivated by the opportunity to be deacons today. Deacons are often the activists in our midst. The ones who help us get important things done. They can be the face of compassion, the ones who bring the needs of the world to the church, the ones who encourage us to show the love of Christ to all. To work for the reign of God and to invite us on that journey.

But like Elisha, contemplating being God's prophet, or any of the three unnamed men who contemplated following Jesus in Luke's narrative, there are other priorities, other needs. A little time – or a lot of time. For them it was a bit of time to put their lives in order – no matter what the call to serve might be. And that sounds perfectly reasonable.

Except in light of the urgency that surrounded those same calls.

We have many demands on our lives. Families, jobs, getting the kids through school. In a way it's no wonder that we put things off until our lives have settled a bit. But that urgency always lurks in the background. That urgency to discover and live out that way to serve God that is uniquely ours. The way we use that original set of gifts, skills and energy that is God's gift to us. Whatever that looks like.

A prayer from the New Zealand Prayer Book sums it up well.

God, you are working still,
breaking down and building up;
Open our eyes to discern your hands
so that we may take our place
as laborers together with you.

Will it be now – or a week from some Thursday?