



**5th Sunday in Pentecost/Time after Pentecost**  
**June 27, 2010**  
**“Lessons in Discipleship”**

Prayer: Bless this word proclaimed, and we who hear it O Lord, that we may grow in the freedom you intend for us. Amen.

I have to admit, today’s story of Elijah/Elisha intrigues me for several reasons. First, I wonder if there is any symbolism behind the twelve yoke of oxen that Elisha was behind. I wonder if it really took twelve yoke of oxen, or if these twelve were following one another as they plowed the field. Some commentators think the twelve yoke of oxen are a parallel to the twelve disciples.

My second bit of intrigue with this Elijah/Elisha story is the way Elijah ‘hand-picked’ Elisha. For the longest while, I used to think of the story similar to a game of tag. Carrying his mantle, I imagine Elijah walking past the twelve yoke of oxen, and past Elisha. As Elijah passes, he stops, turns, and runs back to Elisha, taking his mantle, touching him with it, and saying, “Tag! You’re it!”

But lately, I have been wondering whether or not this is an accurate picture of events. Maybe what really happened is that Elijah took his mantle and threw it over Elisha’s head. By doing this, Elisha could not see where he was going. Then again, sometimes, when God calls in our lives, we too have difficulty seeing where God is leading, or what God has called us into.

The third area of intrigue and curiosity is the chariot and horses made of fire. Given we live in the twenty-first century, with the latest technology and information, how do we understand this image? Is it something we laugh at, something that we might not think happened? Or is it something we accept for being “as is”, and move on in our lives without thinking about it.

In “The Lutheran Course”, our topic of discussion in both the morning and evening groups has been a discussion on how to read the Bible. We have spent time discussing and distinguishing whether or not the Bible is to be read literally or figuratively. Did the chariot and horses of fire literally happen? Or are they a figurative way to understand how God prevented Elijah from facing death?

A fourth aspect of intrigue is when we look deeper at texts, including Galatians and Luke, there are lessons for us in the art and skill of making disciples. Consider for a moment a mentor, a teacher you may have had who nurtured you in your faith. How did this person lead and instruct you to where you are today?

One of the first steps of making disciples is inviting. Frequently throughout the Gospels, we hear and read of the disciple's invitation of others to 'come and see'. Elijah and Elisha throughout First Kings frequently did the dance of invitation. Elisha would invite himself, Elijah would decline. With any invitation, there is a reason for the invitation to be extended.

During the call process, one of the questions I asked to both the call committee and the council was how is Mt. Eden known in the community? The response I invariably received was "We're known as Mt. Eatin'". Now eating is not bad in and of itself. Jesus frequently did that in his ministry. My question of curiosity, though, that I have often heard asked and wondered myself is when we have an event such as the spaghetti supper, how do we invite those from the community to come and see? When we are out in the community, how do we invite those who do not have a church to join us? How do we tell, through words and actions why we love the Lord and Mt. Eden Lutheran Church? More specifically, what are we doing to invite people to join us in our service of the Lord?

The second step in discipleship is developing, or on the job training. Prior to today's first lesson, Elijah has been pronouncing God's judgement upon Kings Ahab and Ahaziah. While following Elijah, Elisha is receiving on the job training. The disciples later in our Gospel, need some help in developing their leadership skills while on the job. Annoyed they have not been welcomed in Samaria, the disciples wish to call down fire to destroy Samaria. "Lord", they say, "should we not call down fire to destroy them?"

Jesus counsels against the use of violence in making disciples. Realistically, there are probably times where like the disciples, we too may want to do the same thing, to remove someone who disagrees with us, who does not welcome us or the good news we proclaim. Perhaps there are those times, maybe not literally, but there are times, even within our own families, where we want someone else to handle the conflict we are experiencing with another person. We know it foolish to wish for fire to come down from heaven to remove the source of conflict. We may even shy away from the conflict, hoping it will resolve itself and that we will not have to become involved.

Yet Paul in today's reading from Galatians is not discouraging conflict within the community. On one hand, Paul is discouraging conflict if it is for selfish ambitions or motivation. On the other hand, Paul also recognizes that conflict can provide room for the gifts of the Holy Spirit to be received: patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Learning new things can be a challenge. In learning new things, we can be tested, a third step of discipleship. In the movie, “Karate Kid” from several years ago, and the recent remake, a young student wants to learn karate. The young student becomes impatient at repeatedly having to go through motions of “wax on/wax off”. The student becomes even more impatient when the instructor assigns tasks that seem to have nothing to do with karate itself. Although the tasks of painting the fence and washing the car are tasks needing to be done, the young student sees these tasks as a waste of time, and not helpful in learning Karate. Eventually, the student begins to see what the wise karate instructor is trying to teach him: patience and discipline.

When we are learning something new, in any subject, it can be a test, it can be a challenge. We grow impatient, if not frustrated when results do not come easily. Let us look closer at Elijah and Elisha. Three times, Elisha asked to follow Elijah. Each time he asked to do so, Elijah gave reasons for Elisha to remain behind. It is within our human nature to test the limits of love. Couples experience that with one another. Family members frequently test and challenge us. Yet, even in the midst of our testing one another, God looks beyond that. God loves each and every one of us. In that love, God calls us to keep loving God’s children of all ages, even in those times we may scratch our heads in wonderment over the behavior or the commitment of another person.

A fourth step of making disciples is that of parting. Shakespeare once commented: “Parting can be such sweet sorrow”. Sooner or later, the time comes to say good-bye. Good-byes, even when they are anticipated and expected can be difficult. Either the mentor or the student can have difficulty in saying good-bye and going in a different direction. Parting is a way of life, a way of putting into practice what has been learned.

The disciples did not want to hear of Jesus going to Jerusalem. They wanted things to be as they knew it, and as they hoped: of Jesus conquering the current forces of evil. Going to Jerusalem so that Jesus would die was not something the disciples wanted to hear. They wanted to put road blocks up, to keep Jesus with them.

Grieving goes hand in hand with parting. Each and every one of us responds to grief differently than someone else does. For Elisha, his grief over seeing Elijah taken to heaven made his ministry more poignant. Grief and sadness can provide room for the gifts of the Spirit to be nurtured and developed, especially the gift of patience.

The story is told that Italian composer Giacomo Puccini developed cancer in 1922. Puccini instructed his students to finish his opera if something happened to him. Puccini died, and his students finished the opera he had been working on. The opera debuted in 1926 with Puccini’s favorite student, Arturo Toscanini conducting. The opera went along beautifully, until the opera reached the point where Puccini had been forced to quit. With tears running down Toscanini’s face, he stopped, turned to the audience, and exclaimed,

“thus far the Master wrote, but he died”. Silence filled the hall, and Toscanini continued, “but his disciples finished his work.” When the opera was finished, the hall broke into thunderous applause.

And so it is for us. Jesus promised the disciples and us that we would never be forgotten or forsaken. In that promise, we are given both the challenge and the task of continuing Jesus’ work, of making disciples. Not only making disciples, but keeping, and recruiting others to be disciples as well.

Confirming is another step in discipleship. Elijah knew Elisha would be his successor, but he left that revelation to God. Elisha confirmed his new role as prophet when he saw Elijah’s dramatic departure and picked up the mantle.

This leads me to my other question of curiosity: the question of how we are nurturing one another within our faith journeys? If we are building up in love, then we need to keep doing what we are doing: patiently, persistently, and self-lessly. However, if we are tearing down, through our thoughts, words, and actions, then we need to take several steps back and evaluate what we are doing. For nurturing and caring for one another is something like a garden. It takes time and patience over years and years, rather than days and weeks. Nurturing means providing care, even when care does not want to be received. Nurturing means listening, gently cultivating and tending the soil. Nurturing means setting aside our needs for the needs of others.

Nurturing can also mean needing to make a decision. This decision is not necessarily a decision between good and bad. Sometimes a decision needing to be made is between better and better.

Choosing the way of the cross as Jesus wants us to do, is never easy. It leads us not into where we can be comfortable, but rather where we are needed. The way of the cross is a way that frequently can go against the world. Yet when we nurture and care for one another, we continue to cultivate the gifts of the Spirit within each and every one of us. We grow together as a community of faith. More importantly, through the working of the Holy Spirit, we remain free to follow Jesus without fear, to mentor and train others in the faith, and free to respond to God’s call on our lives as we are able.