

Sermon for July 1: Excuses, Excuses

1 Kings 19: 15-21

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

As many of you know, I was out for a couple of weeks, on some denominational business, and on some family business. I had the chance to spend almost an uninterrupted week with my mother, since my sisters, brothers-in-law and I were working on some renovations to her house. My mom LOVES reality shows, and even my visits don't preclude her watching Survivor, or whatever reality show of the minute has her attention. While I was visiting, I had the chance to see an episode of a show I hadn't heard much about, a cooking show on Fox called "Hell's Kitchen." Not an auspicious title, as far as I'm concerned. It features the efforts of a Michelin-starred chef from London, Gordon Ramsay, to find, by process of elimination, someone who very much wants to be a chef of a new major restaurant. It's on Monday nights, and last week's episode dealt with four women: Julia, Bonnie, Jennifer and Melissa, competing against four men: Josh, Brad, Rock and Vinnie. There are challenges of various sorts, and the two teams compete with one another, hoping to do well, and hoping to not be sent off. In fine restaurants, teamwork matters, and to Chef Ramsay, so does honesty and admitting to mistakes. Even in this one episode, it was very clear that he hates excuses, stalling, rationalization, and other ways to evade personal responsibility. Chef was critical of mistakes, but could deal with them, as long as the person who messed up admitted it, and took pains to not do it again. The contestant that was sent off, Vinnie, made lots of excuses, and Chef sited that as one of the reasons why he had to turn in his apron. It also was apparent that in spite of his caustic manner on-screen, Chef also very much cares about fine dining, excellent, healthy food, and outstanding service. He wants these contestants to learn, and to become better chefs. He also wants the customers to have a wonderful dining experience, and if it looks like that is not happening for any reason, he closes the restaurant. He looks for commitments, not excuses, and he will close the restaurant if things fall too far below his standards.

Elijah is looking for commitment, not excuses, when he casts his cloak over his apparent replacement, Elisha. Elisha seems to hesitate, and offers an excuse to not start immediately: he wants to kiss his mother and father; then he will follow. Elijah isn't having any of that, and appears to go on. Elisha DOES turn back, but it is to make clear that he WILL be following Elijah: he sacrifices the oxen he has been using to plow, and uses their wooden yokes to start the fire for the sacrifice. We can assume that he does have the opportunity to kiss his parents goodbye, during the meal that the people eat, and then he does indeed follow Elijah – no more excuses.

There are clearly echoes of Elijah's call to Elisha, and Elisha's response to that call, in the encounters that Jesus has with the followers along the road to Jerusalem. The first person offers to come along wherever Jesus goes. Jesus' response is, "Count the cost first." There will be no excuses here – think about what you are offering, and be sure that you are willing. Jesus calls to the second person to follow Him, but that individual says, "Well, let me bury my father first." At first blush, this might sound reasonable. The only thing is, the father may not have been close to death. There was a strong sense of familial responsibility in ancient Israel; the act of honoring father and

mother encompassed all aspects of caring for elderly parents, including having a socially acceptable funeral. In contrast Jesus says, “The time is now. Now is the time to act. Stop stalling.” The third person says, “I’ll come, Lord, but now quite yet... I have some things to do first.” Jesus says, “Make up your mind. If you put your hand to this plow, this plow to furrow the Kingdom of God, you have to look forward. You can’t plow a straight line if you’re always looking back over your shoulder at your old life.” Elisha SHOWED Elijah that he wasn’t going to be looking back over his shoulder at his old life by taking steps to end his old life. The person Jesus was talking with would have remembered that story, and also known about plowing. Jesus is looking for commitment, not evasion. The underlying message seems to be: make up your mind, counting the cost, and then, to paraphrase that old Nike line, “Just do it.”

So how are we responding to Jesus’ call on our lives? How focused are we, really? Are we prepared – are we counting the cost? Are we making excuses, stalling, evading responsibility, looking back over our shoulders? Or are we stepping out in faith, not knowing all of the details about how we’re getting there, but following Jesus anyway? Even if we follow the very best that we can, we are bound to make mistakes. The good news about that, when we confess our mistakes, when we learn from our mistakes, when we do the best we can to not repeat those mistakes, God forgives us, and encourages us, and directs us in the right way again.

God also gives us encouragement along the way. One of the ways we are encouraged is through the act of taking communion together. Communion usually is not a Michelin starred dining experience in the way that Chef Ramsay would understand it, but communion IS a way for us to taste and see that the Lord is good. Communion IS a way for us to remember Jesus’ teaching, and His love for us, His sacrifice, and our redemption and salvation. Communion gives us a way to respond to the call Jesus places on our lives right now – communion is a way for us to proclaim the kingdom of God, here, in this place. So let us come together, and break bread together, and consider the wonderful ways that God works in our lives. Let us respond, both to the invitation to the table, and to the invitation to follow Jesus all the days of our lives, so that we too may dwell in the house of the Lord forever. And even so, come soon, Lord Jesus. Amen.

For prayers of the people:
Sermon for the Fourth of July

Recently when challenged by a fellow member of parliament as to his unfailing belief in America, England's Prime Minister, **Tony Blair** offered the following;

"A simple way to take measure of a country is to look at how many want in . . . and how many want out. Only two defining forces ever offered to die for you:

- 1) Jesus Christ
- 2) The American G.I.

One died for your soul and the other for your freedom. Many seem to have forgotten both of them." Ernie Gurke, among others, sent this.

1 Kings 19: 15-21

Then the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Luke 9: 51-62

When the days drew near for Him to be taken up, He set His face to go to Jerusalem. And He sent messengers ahead of Him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for Him; but they did not receive Him, because His face was set toward Jerusalem. When His disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But He turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, someone said to Him, “I will follow You wherever You go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have

nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” To another He said, “Follow Me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” Another said, “I will follow You, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”