

The Thirteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	1 Kings 19:16B, 19-21
<i>Response</i>	You are my inheritance, O Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11
<i>Second Reading</i>	Galatians 5:1, 13-1
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Speak, Lord, your servant is listening; you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 9:51-62

The 13th Sunday in ordinary time for Year C takes us into the heart of Luke’s gospel, which is Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. One of the unique things about Luke is that in the middle of his gospel, there’s this long section where Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem and he begins journeying from the north in Galilee down to the south in Judea, to the city of Jerusalem, as his ultimate destination. And many of the teachings of Jesus that are famous from Luke’s gospel, like the Parable of the Prodigal Son or The Good Samaritan, a lot of that material comes to us from this central section, when Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. And so today we begin that section, as we’re looking at the Gospel of Luke 9:51-62. This is the famous story of James and John (of the zeal of James and John), who want to call down fire from heaven upon the Samaritan people, and then Jesus’ response to that zeal when he teaches them about the cost of discipleship. So let’s read through that together and we’ll try to unpack it in light of the Old Testament.

When the days drew near for him to be received up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him; but the people would not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.

As they were going along the road, a man 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, let me first go and bury my father.” But he said to him, “Leave the dead to 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 his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”¹

Okay, there is a lot going on in this passage. Some elements we would want to highlight are, first and foremost, Luke’s anticipation of Jesus’ eventual passion, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. When it says “the days grew near for him to be received up”, notice Luke always has his eyes ultimately on the end of his gospel, which is going to be Jesus ascending into heaven. It’s not just the cross; it’s not even just the resurrection. It’s him being taken up into heaven. That’s the culmination of Jesus’ exodus that he’s going to accomplish in Jerusalem. It’s a very central feature for Luke’s gospel. A second element is Jesus setting his face to Jerusalem or the way to Jerusalem. Scholars have pointed this out; throughout Luke’s gospel, from Luke 9 all the way down to 19, so Luke 9-19, it’s this long section on the way to Jerusalem.

The Greek word for way is *hodos*, it means path or way, and it’s important for Luke for two reasons. First, it calls to mind the *ex-hodos*, the exodus from Egypt, which was a path out of Egypt and to the Promised Land, but it also is important because in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus talks about his own “*ex-hodos*” (in chapter 9, the transfiguration), that he’s going to accomplish in Jerusalem. So Jesus is a new Moses who’s come to bring about a new exodus, but unlike the first exodus (which began in Egypt and ended in Jerusalem with the building of the Temple in the city), the new exodus is going to begin in Jerusalem and then end when Jesus is taken up into heaven. So its ultimate destination is the heavenly kingdom (in heaven with the Father). So basically, chapter 9 marks a turning point in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus sets his face toward the cross and the resurrection and the ascension in his new exodus.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Now in that context, Luke is presuming you know a little bit of geography. So the first eight chapters of the gospel have been taking place in Galilee, in the north, but now Jesus has to go to the south, to Judea, the capitol of which is Jerusalem. And in order to do that, he's got to pass through the middle section of the holy land, which is where the Samaritans dwell, the land of Samaria; the remnants of the northern kingdom of Israel before it was decimated by the Assyrians. And so we get another encounter with the Samaritans in the Gospel of Luke, which are pretty prominent, actually, in the Gospel of Luke. So we want to make sure we understand who they are. Now most people are familiar with the fact that the Samaritans and Jews didn't like each other in the 1st Century A.D. In fact, to this day, there's still a very small group of Samaritans left in the northern part of the Holy Land. They have a shrine near Mt. Gerizim, they accept the first five books of the Jewish Bible as scripture. They read their own version of them but they have them as a copy. And they offer sacrifice to the Lord, the God of Israel. They consider themselves as part of the people of God. Now, in the 1st Century A.D., the Samaritans were a larger group, they were more influential, and they were very widely disliked because of this alternative temple that they had setup in Mt. Gerizim.

Now in order to understand the history of the Samaritans, just a quick overview of Israelite history. If you go back to the 8th Century B.C., in 722 BC, when the Assyrians came in and destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel, the 10 northern tribes, and decimated their capital, which was Samaria; they didn't just exile the northern tribes, they also repopulated that northern part of the land with pagans, with Assyrians who brought their own gods in, but who mixed their own beliefs with that of the Israelite people who had been there (some remnants that were left over). And that amalgamation (which is described in 2nd Kings 15 & 17), that group is the original nucleus of what would later be known as the Samaritan people (who had been named after the northern capital). Now, at first they were pagans, but eventually they took on the beliefs of the people of Israel who were there in the Holy Land. But they were always seen as rivals to the Temple in the south, because they didn't worship in Jerusalem, they built their own temple in Gerizim and had their own religious services, their own priesthood, their own sacrifices. So they didn't like each other, okay? For the Jews, the Samaritans were a kind of living memory of the fact that 10 of the 12 tribes were gone (had been decimated), and that these descendants of pagans had come in, who were mixed blood and who took over the northern territory and setup an alternative temple. So there's always this tension and conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans all the way down to Jesus' day, which you don't see here as clearly in Luke (this account; like it doesn't lay it all

out), but you recall in the Gospel of John 4, when Jesus meets a Samaritan woman and the Samaritan woman says to him, “why are you talking to me? You’re a Jew, I’m a Samaritan.” And John tells you “the Jews and the Samaritans had no dealings with one another”.

So in this case, what’s happened is, geographically, Jesus and his Apostles have to pass through villages of Samaria. And so when they get into this Samaritan village, the Apostles go ahead to make ready for him but the people of the village won’t receive Jesus. Why? Because his face was set toward Jerusalem. What does that mean? Well once he reveals his destination is the alternative temple city (to Gerizim), they don’t want anything to do with him. They hate Jerusalem. As much as they dislike Jews, they really hate Jerusalem. Now everything that I’ve said to you so far, most people are familiar with that (that the Jews and the Samaritans didn’t like each other), but I think it’s helpful (in this case) to add one little more element of context to what Luke’s describing here. According to Josephus, the 1st Century Jewish historian, not only do the Jews and the Samaritans not like each other, but in the 1st Century A.D., in the early decades of the 1st Century, shortly before Jesus’ public ministry began, there had been some incidents (conflict) with the Samaritans that had stirred up that dislike for them. So for example, at the beginning of the 1st Century A.D., Josephus tells us that during the feast of Passover, some Samaritans snuck into the Temple and put human bones inside of the Temple during Passover. Now that would have defiled the Temple because it was a ritual purity defilement to come into contact with a corpse. So you can imagine the feeling of Jews when they found out about this Samaritan plot to defile the Temple during Passover.

Another thing that had happened during the 1st Century, according to Josephus, is that while some Jewish pilgrims were on their way to Jerusalem, a group of Samaritans had murdered the pilgrims when they tried to pass through Samaria. So, again, there were these fresh wounds of conflict and strife and acts of aggression on the part of the Samaritans that would have left a really bad taste in the mouth of Jews, especially devout Jews like Jesus and his Apostles, who were going down to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. You can even imagine a situation here where as the Apostles are on their way to Jerusalem, maybe they would even be aware of things like pilgrims being attacked, or pilgrims even having been murdered on the way to the city. I just bring this up because sometimes people exaggerate the ridiculousness of James and John saying, “Let’s call down fire from heaven”. It seems sometimes people like to make fun of James and John as being so unbelievably zealous, but it’s a little more understandable (I’m not trying to excuse it) in

context if you realize that when you have infighting between groups of people and you have acts of murder and terrorism or aggression that go back a long way, those are deep-seated emotions that can run very, very deeply, and the wounds there are real and open and raw. And so when the Apostles are passing through Samaria, when the Samaritans refuse to receive Jesus (that makes sense), but when the Apostles react by wanting to destroy the Samaritans, it also makes sense in a 1st Century Jewish context. So, with that in mind, as they're going through, the Samaritans refuse to receive them, and so James and John hear of it, they say these words: "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?"

Okay, a couple of things are taking place here. First, we see the zeal of James and John. They are obviously (literally) on fire for Jesus and ready to call down fire from heaven. Now, if you're a Jew and you think about fire falling from heaven, what are you going to think of? Well, the first instance would be Sodom and Gomorrah. In Genesis 19, God rains down fire from heaven upon the Sodomites as a way of enacting judgment. He decimates their city. So you can see that James and John, by wanting to call down fire from heaven, are saying that the Samaritans aren't just people with whom we happen to disagree, they are wicked and they deserve to be destroyed. However, there's another allusion that people tend to miss, which is from the book of King. In 2nd Kings 1:9-16, the prophet Eli'jah, not Eli'sha but Eli'jah (the first of the two), calls down fire from heaven to consume his enemies. So, James and John know the bible, they know the Old Testament, so what does that reveal if they're thinking about that Old Testament precedent? Well it's simple, they see Jesus either as a new Eli'sha (who was Eli'jah's successor), or as a kind of new Eli'jah. He's a new prophet who has come into the world to bring the word of God, and just like the Old Testament prophets, Eli'jah (and Eli'sha for that matter), show no mercy to their enemies. Eli'jah calls down fire from heaven. Eli'sha sick a bear on these boys who are mocking him and the bear mauls them. These are very violent episodes from the Old Testament.

That's the framework that James and John are working with. So when they encounter these Samaritans whom they consider to be enemies, it's natural for them to think of Jesus (who's a kind of new Eli'sha), this new prophet, successor to John the Baptist, to say "Hey, you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them and to destroy them. They are our enemies." But Jesus is not just a new Eli'jah (or a new Eli'sha, I should say), he's a new and greater prophet. And he has a different message for them. So he turns to them and what does he do? He rebukes

them, because if you think about it, this is Luke 9. What has Jesus said to his apostles in Luke 6, in the sermon on the side of the mountain (the Sermon on the Level Place)? What is he calling them to do with their enemies? Destroy your enemies? No. His message is going to be to “love your enemies”. Which by the way, St. Paul will say in Romans, when you do love your enemies, it’s like pouring heaps of burning coal onto their head. So you still get to burn them up, it’s just through charity and not through fire from heaven. It’s the fire from heaven of the Holy Spirit that consumes them, hopefully. So, anyway, in any case, Jesus rebukes the apostles. He’s not going to replicate what Eli’jah and Eli’sha did to their enemies in the Old Testament. So, very important point of typology.

Sometimes it’s really fascinating and interesting (even exciting) to look at the similarities between the Old and New, but there are also dissimilarities as well, and they’re very important. There’s a discontinuity here. Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost. And it’s interesting in this regard, I’ve mentioned in the past that there are some ancient manuscripts where verses are missing from the Gospel of Luke. So for example, if you read Luke 22, the Agony in the Garden, some translations will skip over the verses where Jesus sweats blood and the angel accompanies him. And the reason is those verses are missing from some ancient copies of Luke. Well in this case, there is a verse, if you look at Luke 9:55, in the footnotes sometimes of your translation, it will say, “other ancient manuscripts add these words” (and it isn’t in the lectionary I’m reading, but I’ll just give it to you), “Jesus rebuked them and said, ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of, for the Son of man came not to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.’” There’s an extra there that’s present in some ancient copies of Luke. Now there is a debate about whether it’s original or not, but even if it’s not original, it gets at the heart of Jesus’ rebuke, because elsewhere in Luke he’s going to say, “The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost, not to destroy”. But, in that context, Jesus in a sense responds to their zeal by laying out some more teachings about how much discipleship is going to cost and what it’s going to look like.

So we have these three sayings on the cost of discipleship that follow. First, the guy says, “I’m going to follow you wherever you go, and Jesus points to his poverty and his itinerancy: “birds of the air have their nests, foxes have their holes, but the Messiah, the Son of man doesn’t even have anywhere to lay his head.” He’s homeless. Second, another person, Jesus calls him to follow him, and he says “well can I go and bury my dad first?” And Jesus says one of the most shocking sayings in all of the New Testament: “Let the dead bury their dead. As for you, go and pro-

claim the kingdom.” Now, it’s hard to overestimate the fact that the duty to bury the dead, especially to bury your parents, was one of the supreme duties in 1st Century Judaism. It was considered a commandment of the law, especially in light of the Decalogue (honor your Father and Mother). One of the supreme acts of honor to a father and mother would be to bury them. And yet here, when the person uses having to bury his father as an excuse for not following Jesus, Jesus flips it and says “Let the dead bury their dead, you go and proclaim the kingdom”. This is very similar to what Jesus will say elsewhere in the gospels, that if anyone loves father or mother, sister or brother, or daughter or son more than me, he’s not worthy of me. He’s not worthy to be my disciple.

Now who in the world, what human being would have the right to command you to love him more than you love your parents? The only person in the Old Testament who is to be loved above your parents is God himself. So see, through this shocking saying, what Jesus is doing is implicitly revealing his divine identity. And then finally, another person says “I’ll follow you Lord but can I tell my family bye?” And Jesus says, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” I’ve always thought that was one of the scariest passages in the New Testament. Because what Jesus is saying is once you set out on the path of discipleship to follow me, don’t look back. There’s no turning back to your old way of life. In the language of the Exodus, there’s no going back to Egypt. Don’t even look back at Egypt, because if you do, you’re not fit for the kingdom of God. Discipleship for the kingdom requires total adherence, total self-gift to Christ, in which everything is going to be given up in order to follow him. Nothing is put ahead of him, even family, even friends, even parents, even children. He’s first above all else.

Now again, in a 1st Century Jewish context, it’s fascinating because both of those images, putting your hand to the plow and looking back, would echo two Old Testament passages. The first one is the call of Eli’sha, the prophet, the successor to Eli’jah, whom Eli’jah calls while he’s plowing the fields. So here’s another Eli’jah-Eli’sha echo in this gospel reading for today. Jesus is like a new Eli’jah, calling his disciples to be like new Eli’sha’s (new prophetic successors), and just like Eli’sha was plowing the field and left it behind to follow Eli’jah, so now Jesus is saying to his disciples, even more, “Don’t even put your hand to the plow. If you do, you’re not fit to be my disciple.” And the other image is of course Lot’s wife in Genesis 19, who looks back not to Egypt, but looks back to the sinful city of Sodom in longing for what’s being lost when the city’s destroyed. And there’s your other par-

allel, it's fascinating. They're calling down fire from heaven on the Samaritans, that's an echo of Sodom, the image of looking back here makes you think of Lot's wife, also an image of Sodom and Gomorrah. So Jesus here is calling for a radical detachment from past life, from past sins, but also from good things, like parents and family and land. Which, if you think about it, parents, family, land, those are natural goods that we're all deeply attached to. It's very natural for a human being to be deeply attached to their family, their friends, their life and their land (their possessions). But Jesus is saying none of those things can come ahead of me. That's the cost of discipleship. And, if you have any doubts about that, just look at the first reading for today, because guess what it is? It's the call of Eli'sha by the prophet Elijah. Let's look at 1st Kings 19:16, 19-21.

Eli'sha the son of Shaphat of A'bel-meho'lah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.

Here, it's speaking to Eli'jah. And then it skips down to verse 19:

So he departed from there, and found Eli'sha the son of Shaphat, who was plowing, with twelve yoke of oxen before him, and he was with the twelfth. Eli'jah passed by him and cast his mantle upon him. And he left the oxen, and ran after Eli'jah, and said, "Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you." And he said to him, "Go back again; for what have I done to you?" And he returned from following him, and took the yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Eli'jah, and ministered to him.

So notice, a few elements here. First, there are two figures here, they're easily confused. Eli'jah and Eli'sha. Now in English they sound the same, but in Hebrew they're different. In Hebrew, Eli'jah is actually pronounced *'eliyahu*. And Eli'sha is pronounced *elisha*. You can hear it better because the accent's on the last syllable. Eli-yah and Eli-sha. Sometimes people will say "Elisha" (in English); basically there's no way to pronounce this in English without being either confused or sounding like Eli'sha is a woman rather than a man. So, call him whatever you like. But in any case, Eli'jah, the lead prophet (Eli-yah), calls Eli'sha (Elisha) to be a prophet, an *nāḇî*, a successor to him. And notice here that Eli'sha is plowing when Eli'jah calls him and he wants to go and kiss his family goodbye. And unlike Jesus, what does Eli'jah do? He lets him do it. So the contrast here, the discontinuity is significant. Eli'jah doesn't demand that Eli'sha not kiss his family before he

comes and follows him. Jesus will demand more. He's going to say "let the dead bury their dead, you come and follow me." So the commitment that Christ is calling for is greater than that of the prophet Eli'jah in the Old Testament. So, also very important, whenever there's typology, it's not just that Jesus is a new figure from the Old Testament, it's that he's new and he's greater. He's going to demand more. And in this case, he demands everything from his apostles, who will be the prophets of the good news of his death, resurrection, and ascension into Heaven. That's what discipleship costs: everything.

And in closing then, from the living tradition, I would just give you two quotes, one from St Basil the Great and one from St Cyril of Alexandria. And this is what they say about the cost of discipleship. St Basil was speaking to people about baptism and he wrote:

"A person who wishes to become the Lord's disciple must repudiate a human obligation, however honorable it may appear, if it slows us ever so slightly in giving wholehearted obedience we owe to God."²

So notice what he's saying there, this total commitment to Jesus isn't just for priests or nuns, religious or bishops, it's for every baptized person. Every baptized person is called to make Christ first in their lives, and not to let any human relationship or any earthly good get in the way of obedience to Jesus and of following Jesus. And Cyril of Alexandria says something similar:

"We learn from this that the fear of God is to be set even above the reverence and love due to parents. The law of Moses, in the first place, commanded that you shall love the Lord God with all your soul, all your might, and all your heart. It put as second to it the honor due to parents, saying, "Honor your father and your mother."³

One of the first great commentaries on the Gospel of Luke in the early church. So what's he saying here? Once again, just as the honor due to parents comes on the 2nd tablet in the tablet of the Ten Commandments, so too, the love given to Jesus (the devotion given to Jesus) supersedes even the honor that we have to give to our parents. Love of parents cannot come in the way (or get in the way) of discipleship

² Basil the Great, *On Baptism* 1.1.; trans. in A. Just, *Luke*, 169

³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke, Homily 58*; trans. in A. Just, *Luke*, 169

to Christ. And throughout the centuries this has been a very important principle, especially in missionary territories, where when the gospel is first brought to a new people or a new land, one of the first things it does is cause division between parents and children, between spouses, between brothers and sisters, as people detach from their inherited traditions or beliefs of their families and then attach to the good news of Jesus Christ. And of course this is going to look different in different states of life. Like to what degree of discipleship is Jesus calling me? Is he calling me, like the people in the gospel, to leave everything and take up a radical life of poverty, chastity and obedience? Jesus does call some people to that. Or am I going to live in the married state, in which he's calling me to a less radical expression of poverty, chastity and obedience, but still, to take up prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, the three pillars of Christian discipleship. What does this look like in my state of life? Well today's gospel teaches us is this, whatever state of life you live out your discipleship in (and Jesus doesn't call every single person to abandon everything and come and follow him in the same way that he calls the twelve, for example, or the women who travel with him), all of us are taught by the gospel today, put nothing, absolutely nothing, even love of parents, love of property, of possessions, none of those things can ever come ahead of Christ. The cost of discipleship is total. We give everything to Jesus in order to take up the cross and follow him.