

## ***Following Mercy***

A Morning Message for Worship on the Fifth Sunday of Lent  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT  
March 13, 2016  
Text: Luke 9:57-62

This morning's text from Luke is one of the more troublesome stories about Jesus. He behaves in this story in ways we find difficult to reconcile with who we think Jesus is. We like to think of Jesus as kind and compassionate, loving everyone and trying to make sick people healthy again, even raising some from the dead. We imagine him with gentle blue eyes and soft, wavy brown hair, and a voice we could listen to for hours. It makes sense to us that people would flock to him everywhere he went because he was just so wonderful, so loving, so willing to do whatever he could to make people feel better physically, mentally and spiritually. Then Luke has to go and screw all that up with this story where Jesus is downright surly to people anxious to follow him. "Not so fast," Jesus seems to be saying leaving us to do a double-take wondering who this person is.

Three times in a few minutes people interact with Jesus about following him. To the first, Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Well, okay. Jesus and the disciples do live on the road without a place to stay most of the time. Not a lifestyle for the faint of heart and they certainly don't need any

deadwood holding them back. But Jesus' words to the next person get worse, much worse. This time Jesus looks someone in the face and says, "follow me" only to have the man reply, " 'Lord, first let me bury my father.'" Now this sounds very reasonable to us. Of course Jesus will understand that this guy just lost his dad and he wants to be at the funeral. Of course Jesus will be compassionate here. Nope. " 'Let the dead bury their own dead,'" he says. What? He didn't just say that! And he's no kinder to the next person who says to him, " 'I will follow you Lord but let me first say farewell to those at my home.'" By now we're bracing ourselves because we know something caustic is coming and it does: " 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.'" Ouch. That stings *us*!

In truth, this last harsh response is actually a reference back to the calling of the prophet Elisha recorded in 1 Kings 19. It's a complicated story that ends with Elisha rightly figuring out this is a call from God and instead of returning the oxen to his parents, he slaughters them as a sacrifice to God and then follows Elijah, presumably never turning back again. But what of these other two caustic, harsh responses to people who seem sincere, at least to our ears, about their desire to follow Jesus? Why is Jesus so mean to them? In all candor, that's a tough one to answer. In my reading this week, scholarly responses are all over the place. One person actually suggests Jesus is being a jerk (I'm quoting that

scholar) because he's just tired and cranky and he's already figured out he's going to die in Jerusalem. So, he has no patience with folks dealing with what he sees as trivialities. Well, okay. Not the Jesus we're used to but certainly a very human response. Another scholar thinks this exchange is really about Jesus reminding these would be followers that a decision to follow him is really a decision to leave behind worldly security, including your family, your inheritance and all forms of worldly security. Well, that may be but it still feels mean. Yet another scholar thinks this is Jesus' way of emphasizing the urgency of the call to follow him. Jesus' time is short and he knows it. He needs anyone who wants to follow him to understand that too before committing. He also needs them to know that once committed, there is no turning back. This does make sense, but geesh, it's still pretty harsh.

What intrigues me as I read this text is to pay attention to who is asking whom. The first guy comes up to Jesus, presumably while he is hurrying along intent on making the most of the time he has left. What I wonder is, did Jesus see this man come out of his house so he would know the kind of place the man was used to living in? Or could he tell by the way the man was dressed that he did have some place to live that allowed him to have clean clothes and regular meals and rest on a regular basis? I'm sure he could tell if this man was homeless or a man used to the nicer things in life just by looking at him. We can, usually, can't we? So why

wouldn't Jesus. So, of course, he would want this man to know what he's in for before making such a big commitment.

It's the next guy I'm really interested in, though. He doesn't approach Jesus. The text is clear Jesus approaches him and says follow me. And the guy immediately finds an excuse not to go but not in a way that sounds like he's saying no. Sure, Jesus, I just have to go to my father's funeral. Now honestly, doesn't this sound familiar? Think about how many people come up with dead grandmothers or dead uncles or any number of dead relatives to avoid doing something they really don't want to do. So, harsh though it sounds, it also rings true to what we know about humans being asked to make a big commitment to something. We hate to say no so we find an excuse that won't make us look bad and what could be better than a supposedly dead loved one. Perhaps, the one who really looks bad in this exchange isn't Jesus after all.

But I do want us to think more about Jesus and this man who was speaking to him who said he couldn't follow Jesus because he had to bury his father. I want us to ponder this because the works of mercy for this week are burying the dead and praying for others. As I thought about these two works, I pondered which Gospel text I could use as a foundation for our reflections together this morning. An obvious choice might have been Lazarus, but the focus in that story is not about the burial

per se. It's on the fact that Jesus unburied Lazarus, calling him out of the tomb. I don't think that's what the work of burying the dead is about. In fact, I know it's not. But what is it about? Just what it says, I think – burying the dead, as a work of mercy.

We have actually have two examples of burying the dead from the events of this past week. Two deaths occurred which the whole world took note of – First Lady Nancy Reagan died this past Sunday and Westerly's own Dorian Murray died this past Tuesday. The deaths of Mrs. Reagan and Dorian had a few things in common. Both were expected. Both leave behind people who loved them dearly. Both elicited a very public response. And both deaths were followed by burial. That's where the similarities end.

Dorian, the little boy from Westerly whose strength and courage in the face of terminal cancer inspired the world, was laid to rest very privately. This is what the family wanted and, of course, we understand and support that decision. There will be a public prayer vigil to honor Dorian's life at some point but as his family gathered to entrust Dorian to God's eternal care, they just wanted – and needed – each other in that moment, and no one else. That's as it should be.

Dorian's burial stands in stark contrast to that of First Lady Nancy Reagan. The wife of one of the most popular Presidents of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mrs. Reagan had a very public funeral and burial, all of it planned by her, or so the media and her family

informed us. Her children spoke along with other dignitaries. The funeral itself was by invitation only, to 1000 of those persons Mrs. Reagan chose to be present as she rejoined her beloved husband in death. Everyone knows where Mrs. Reagan is buried and we can assume that, shortly, her final resting place will return to being a tourist attraction of sorts as the graves of all former Presidents and their wives become.

These two very public deaths remind us that burying the dead is a very nuanced thing – more nuanced than we usually stop to consider. Final goodbyes, grief, closure, pausing a moment both to celebrate the life of a loved one even as one faces head on the enormity of loss – all of these actions are a part of burying the dead. There are few things in life more difficult, more painful, more traumatizing than the day one buries a beloved spouse or parent or sibling or dear friend. There are no times when we need the love and support of others more than when we are in the throes of dealing with such incomprehensible loss. This is why funerals matter. This is why the beautiful prayers and rituals of a memorial service and a burial service are such an important part of grieving and the long process of moving beyond the loss.

One of my favorite lines from the liturgy for a funeral comes in the words of greeting as the service begins when I say these words: “In our gathering in this way we are reminding each other and everyone we know that in life and in death, we belong to

Christ Jesus whose presence is ever with us. We know that we are never left alone.” We know that we are never left alone because Jesus walks through those moments with us, pausing with us when the journey forward is too painful, carrying us when the journey is too hard. So, of course, burying the dead is a work of mercy. We all know that. We all do that, especially in this church as we rally around members of our church family who are in the midst of unbearable loss and grief. And *all* loss is unbearable, whether the loved one lost is an elderly person who lived a long and full life or a young child dead too soon from disease or accident or worse. In the moment when your loved one leaves you in death, it doesn’t matter how old or how young they were at death. It doesn’t matter if they were famous or just plain folk. It doesn’t matter if you were on good terms or bad. Nothing matters except that they are gone and a big hole remains where they were. Those standing on the edge of the grave are left to deal with that emptiness in ways impossible to understand or imagine. And this is why praying for others in the midst of this pain and loss is a work of mercy too.

Praying for others is something this church does very well. Our prayer time together every Sunday morning is always a deeply meaningful part of the service as we share our deepest worries and joys with God and each other. Our Prayer Tree connects us with each other throughout the week and those who

need and request our prayers within hours when needed. Our prayer candles remind us that the light of God reveals our way forward through those times when darkness threatens to overwhelm. Prayer is so obviously a work of mercy here and yet still we should remind ourselves that it is work – something that takes intentionality and effort. Prayer, though at times spontaneous, does not just happen. It is the result of one's relationship with God nurtured and practiced intentionally every day of one's life.

Prayer, then, is the key – our key – to following mercy wherever it leads us. Sometimes that it is to joyful celebration of people and events, some of whom we don't even know. Sometimes it is to the side of the sickbed or to someone struggling with the loneliness and frustration of a limited life. And sometimes, we follow mercy to the very edge of the grave where we stand with those who are burying the dead. In this work of mercy itself surrounded by and immersed in prayer, we rediscover, remember, and restore our faith that in life and in death, we are never alone. Jesus will never abandon us. Thanks be to our merciful and amazing God. Amen.