

September 4, 2016
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. Jason Haddox

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions."

There is a picture making the rounds on social media lately, an image of a wide, pale pathway of irregular stones laid in a wide track, with weeds growing up between, and ruined columns and grassy hillsides flanking on either side. The caption overlaid on this image reads: "1800 Year Old Roman Road: Still In Better Shape Than I-35."

The Roman Empire was very good at roadbuilding, no doubt of that. They had to be, because if you're going to conquer the entire known world, you have to have a way to get all your soldiers and animals and equipment to the outermost margins of the territory efficiently and undamaged. All of that equipment and baggage, weapons and uniforms and personal items had a name. The Romans called all of that luggage, all of that stuff, "impedimentia." The Latin word for "luggage" becomes the root for our English "impediment", that which gets in the way and trips us up and holds us back.

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus..." we are told in the Gospel this morning. Which is bizarre, because immediately before this scene, we read about Jesus eating a Sabbath meal in the home of a leader of the Pharisees. There were no crowds wedged into the dining room—Sabbath meal this may be, but it's not the Sunday lunch rush at the cafeteria. But suddenly Jesus has to rush off and get back on the road, surrounded by a crowd of people, traveling. Possibly on a Roman road, there were certainly a number of them in Palestine in those days. And where is he traveling?

To Jerusalem. We know where he's going, and we know what will happen when he gets there. The Triumphal Entry into the Holy City, the arrest and trial and crucifixion...all this is still a ways off in the story, but all things are gathering in that direction. So time is short, and Jesus is trying to tell his traveling companions what to expect.

I can't help wonder if he was thinking about the Roman system as he walked that road that day. If he saw horses and mules laden with the equipment of empire, straining to keep going as they dragged the load along. The foot soldiers under helmets and breastplates, sweating in the sun. The officers, swearing and barking orders. The slaves in the rear of the line, pushing and pulling and burdened under their own responsibilities to carry and keep track of and make sure this or that crate or barrel or package arrived undamaged. What an enormous amount of work and worry!

It's not the first time Jesus has talked about "stuff." Wealth, or possessions, or money—all the stuff that seems to be necessary for life, and yet becomes the impedimentia. The impediment, the thing (or things) that gets in the way and holds us back, even as it creates a powerful and seductive illusion. The illusion of self-sufficiency.

You know that illusion. So do I. The illusion that...
If I have enough stuff, then I don't have to ask for anything.
If I have enough stuff, I don't have to let other people see that I am vulnerable.
If I have enough stuff, I get to be "in control."

Jesus, and all the great teachers of spiritual reality through the centuries, have warned against such illusions. He uses strong language today, exaggeratedly making a point about choosing awareness over illusion. The word "hate" here is not an emotion or a feeling. It is a moment of clarity, the "Aha/Oh \$#!+" realization, a conscious awareness of a greater, more demanding call than the ordinary (and legitimate) goods of bodily comfort and ordinary familiar relationships.

To follow Jesus on this journey he is undertaking is to recognize (even just a little bit) that all the "stuff", all the possessions, all the ways and patterns by which we attempt to manage and manipulate other people and even ourselves, ultimately have to be put aside. All of that will be put to death, sooner or later, in order to allow the life of God at the heart of the universe to be made manifest even in our imperfect, broken, vulnerable, needy, out-of-control selves. As long as we keep trying to manage it on our own terms, we remain not only "in possession" of all the impedimenta, but "possessed" by it as well.

The spiritual wise ones have always know this. The early monastics, the Desert Fathers and Mothers (as they were called) of the early Christian Church fled the cities of the Holy Land and Egypt, and went into the desert, into the wilderness. In those places of solitude and austerity, they found a truth that was to set them free indeed: an utter dependence upon the Lord, and an interdependence upon one another. Even the most solitary of hermits can only be in solitude for so long; that solitude is never absolute.

The medieval mystic, writer, and spiritual guide Julian of Norwich lived much of her life in a single room, walled up against her ever going out or anyone ever coming in. And yet she received visitors, conversing through a tiny window in one wall. She gave counsel and guidance in prayer and the spiritual life to those who came seeking. The people outside her one-room hermitage provided her with every mouthful of bread and every sip of water. She had very little with her in that room; she lived by and with those other people. Her physical life, and their spiritual lives, were interdependent, one upon the other.

An old proverb from Africa says it well:
If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

The early Christian monastics usually did not take long physical journeys. Lady Julian never left her cell in the town square in Norwich. The spiritual journey is not measured in miles or kilometers, but it can go far further than any mapmaker ever calculated.

My brothers and sisters, we have a long way to go. Together, we will make it.
The Holy Spirit is guiding and inspiring us;
Christ is walking ahead, inviting us to let go of the "stuff", to travel lightly;
Life in God is our goal, and our sustenance toward that goal, at every step along the way.
May it be so with us, may it be so among us, today and all our days.