

“Holding Back”
a sermon
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Trinity Reformed Church
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Luke 9:51–62

1 Kings 19:15–16, 19–21

Some people have a flair for the dramatic.

They can't just say something. They've got to say it with volume, or tears, or a rush of words that overwhelms all opposition.

They can't just make a point. They've got to make their point with wild gestures or the slamming of doors. Or, for the romantics among them, with flowers and strategically placed mementos of adoration.

Those with a flair for the dramatic leave big footprints. Their actions demand attention, and we can't help but pay attention.

Such people may not be easy to take. Their drama may strike us, at times, as a little over the top. But deep down, we tend to admire such people, at least a little. We secretly wish that we could say things with as much oomph as they do. We covet their creativity and their fearlessness in using it. We wish we had it in us to cause a stir or make the splash they always seem to make.

Elisha seems to have been one of those people. Of course, he's in good company. The Bible is full of demonstrative people, especially the prophets. When they had something to say, they often said it with style. I like that.

When we first meet Elisha, however, he was not yet a prophet. But he soon would be, even if he did not yet know it. He was, that day, simply going about his business, doing his work. His work, we learn, was plowing. And, boy, did he know how to plow. He was out there, in the fields, with twelve yoke of oxen. Well, I'm no farmer, but it seems that this means that he was driving his plow with twenty four of these beasts, one ox connected to one other, in pairs. That's a lot of horsepower, or rather, ox-power. I'd say that means Elisha knew what he was doing, that he was an accomplished farmer. How many of us would know what to do with one ox, let alone twenty four?

So along comes the prophet, Elijah. He's been sent on his way by God, who has told him to anoint Elisha as his successor. It takes some time: the roads were long, travel was slow, especially on foot. But Elijah finally finds Elisha. Sure enough, he's at work, in the fields, with those twelve yoke of oxen.

So Elijah knows what he must do, how he must fulfill his obedience to God's command. And Elijah, just like all those other prophets in the Bible, is no stranger to the dramatic, the demonstrative. He walks up to Elisha, walks past him in fact, as if he is just going on his way, and as he passes him, Elijah takes his mantle, kind of a light cloak, and casts it over Elisha.

Now, I think that if the same thing had happened to any of us, we probably would have wondered what it all meant.

“Hey, man! You dropped your scarf!”

Elisha, however, knew exactly what it meant.

He knew that it meant Elijah was calling him to be his successor. He knew that it meant *God* was calling him to become a prophet. He knew this, because he knew — as did everyone in Israel — who Elijah was and the things he had done. He knew the God-given power of the man. He knew the significance of his mantle, that it was more than a trademark of the prophet, that it both symbolized and often expressed his prophetic power. And when Elisha found that mantle suddenly, dramatically, tossed across his shoulders by the great prophet stealthily walking past him, he knew that his life was about to change.

And it’s then that we learn that Elisha, too, has a flair for the dramatic. He says to Elijah, “Give me a moment, would ya? I’ve got to say goodbye to Mom and Dad.” And to this, Elijah says — well, it’s a very loose translation of the Hebrew, but I think it conveys its sense — he says: “Whatever.”

So Elisha rushes off, supposedly to say goodbye to his parents. And boy, does he. He walks up to his oxen and . . . well, I won’t get too descriptive. It’s not for the squeamish. Let’s just say that he “takes care” of the oxen, and they become the fixings for a really big stew. And he invites everybody from town to join them for this great meal. And when he’s done — the neighbors well fed, the pots and pans put away, Mom sitting on the couch with a box of Kleenex and the now tear-stained photo album full of pictures of young Elisha open in her lap, Dad grimly puttering in the garage — Elisha turns his back on his old life and follows Elijah.

For that’s really what was going on here. Elisha asked Elijah for this small consideration, not as a way to stall, not for making excuses, but so he could *really* follow Elijah, so he could put behind him the life he had known and begin a new one. For those twelve yoke of oxen, they weren’t merely window dressing. They were his livelihood. They were the tools of his trade. And by chopping them in pieces and cooking them up, he was saying to that trade, “No more. I’m done” — and saying it rather dramatically.

Some years later, Jesus was making his way from town to town. And he was attracting followers.

This was different than what happened with Elijah. He sought out one follower, by the command of God. Indeed, he wasn’t sure that he *wanted* to seek out that follower, but God said so, and Elijah complied. And that one follower had no idea that he was to be a follower until that moment when Elijah vaulted his garment across his shoulders.

But with Jesus, there were several potential followers. Some approached him, attracted by his message and the promise of religious greatness. Others Jesus identified and called. The result of all these interactions, as we read of them in this morning’s lesson, were a bit, well, unusual, and unexpected.

You see, none of these potential followers seemed to get it. They didn’t really perceive the seriousness of following Jesus; they really didn’t understand the life-changing finality of it. They didn’t get that to follow Jesus was a beginning that was also an ending, the putting behind of the past so a new future could begin.

So Jesus had to tell them. Of course, with Jesus, the telling is not the same way for each person. He corrects each as each needed correction, in just the appropriate way given that one's misunderstanding.

But in each of these corrections, what we hear from Jesus may surprise us. In one, he seems to turn away someone who wants to follow him. To another whom he calls, when the young man says, "Yes, Jesus, but let me first bury my father," he replies, "Let the dead bury their own dead." And to another, who wants (like Elisha?) to say goodbye to his family, Jesus says, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Wow. Just . . . wow.

That doesn't sound like Jesus! Does it?

We're familiar with a Jesus who says "I forgive you." We're comfortable with a Jesus who says, "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I will give you rest." We like *that* Jesus. But *this* Jesus, he basically says to one, "Give me a break." And he says to another, "Get real."

Oh, can't we have the nice, pleasant, comfortable and comforting Jesus, instead?

For this Jesus sounds awfully harsh. Doesn't he understand what they're going through? Doesn't he have any compassion for their situations?

Well, my friends, I think that misses the point, a point we might discover if we remember good old Elisha, and recognize an important difference between him and these would-be followers of Jesus.

You see, Jesus is challenging them. For he wants them to know this: following Jesus is serious business. Joining him in his work is mighty important stuff. It's not a hobby. It's not a form of volunteerism. It's not something they do as a diversion, as a break from their "real" work. So he challenges them, as if to ask them, "Are you willing to follow me as Elisha followed Elijah, yes, Elisha, who gave up all, who slaughtered his oxen, the tools of his trade, destroying the instruments of his livelihood? Are you willing to make that dramatic a break with your old life for a new life with me?"

What Jesus was telling these would-be followers was that discipleship is life-changing and all-consuming. And they — well, they were just making excuses. They were holding back. They had betrayed their true attitude, that they could give just a little piece of their time and attention to Jesus. But Jesus didn't want a piece. Jesus wanted the whole thing. "Don't give me a part of you. Give me *all* of you. Don't hold back!"

And that, I believe, is what Jesus tells us.

That's right. For us, too, following Jesus is supposed to be life-changing and all-consuming. Of us, too, Jesus wants not a piece but the whole thing.

If you're going to follow Jesus, you have to do so understanding what is expected: a giving of yourself wholeheartedly, unreservedly, with a readiness to make radical life changes for him.

"But that's what we have *you* for, Dan. That's why we have pastors, and missionaries, to make those radical life-changes on our behalf."

Nonsense.

I'm sorry to be so blunt. But you can't be a Christian by proxy. You can't count yourself as a follower of Jesus by watching someone else do, or try to do, the "following." (*Gee, look at him go. Oops, I guess he stumbled.*) In case you've not heard me say this before, let me say it again: Christianity isn't a spectator sport.

For us too, Jesus' words are a challenge. He wants us to know that following him is serious business. Joining him in his work is mighty important stuff. It's not a hobby. It's not a form of volunteerism. It's not something you do as a diversion, as a break from your "real" work. He challenges *us*, as if to ask *us*, "Are you willing to follow me as Elisha followed Elijah? Are you ready to slay your oxen, to leave all behind for me?"

And so Jesus' challenge to us is likewise one that asks us whether we are making excuses, whether we are holding back.

Quite likely, we are. Maybe not in everything, with everything. But it's pretty certain that most of us are holding back a piece of our lives, keeping it in reserve for ourselves, rather than giving it over to God. We are so much like those would-be followers of Jesus from long ago, echoing them with our own versions of "yes-but," our own excuses. We do hold back, even as we give to Jesus some of what we think of (laughably) as "our own lives."

Of course, it's not easy for us. We hold back: out of fear, out of ignorance, out of deep seated needs for control and comfort. We hold back: because it is who we are, not the "who" we want to be, not the "who" we are supposed to be, but the "who" we have become.

But Jesus' word of challenge is also Jesus' word of liberation. Jesus calls us to follow him, a following that is life-changing. But that call to follow is made with hand outstretched, from one who is strong to we who are weak, from him who is certain to us who are uncertain, the mighty-to-save to us who need saving.

You see, it is not all about what we do, about the life changes we make on our own. Although you can't follow Jesus by proxy, you can't treat the Christian faith as a spectator sport, neither is discipleship an accomplishment, nor is following Jesus a reflection of your own talent, strength, and skill. To be a Christian is first and foremost a matter of reliance, the recognition that our strength is not sufficient while his strength is all-sufficient.

It is this recognition that is the secret to the letting go. In the gift of this recognition, this realization, of our own weakness and Christ's strength, Jesus gives us the possibility of letting go of our holding back, and to say, with honesty, humility, and perhaps even with a touch of the dramatic, "Yes, Jesus, I will follow you wherever you go."

Let us rely on him, so we may be released from holding back.