

Sermon on Luke 9:51-62
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, June 26, 2016
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Do any of you have a tendency to procrastinate? Do you know anyone who does? What does the word “procrastinate” mean, you might ask? In a nutshell, it means doing later what you could do today. The infamous Procrastinators Club motto may very well be: *Never do today what you could do tomorrow!* Always later, never today! Which usually means that: beds don’t get made, houses don’t get cleaned, offices don’t get organized, wills are never written, and needed changes in the church or nation never happen. Because there is a lack of urgency: if I don’t *have* to do it today, I just may never do it! Or in the world of politics, the people may demand something now, like doing something against gun violence, but if I can wait it out, the moment will pass, and people will forget all about it.

For much of our lives, you and I have the privilege of taking our time, in order to think about things, about what direction we will go and what we will do. If we have an abundance of time on our hands, sometimes we don’t feel any urgency at all to make a decision, and so we often sit immobilized, making no decisions one way or another, unable to move or decide. But when we have a life or death situation on our hands, when what we do has to be done quickly or we might lose our options, or even die – well, then we move a lot faster. For there is no time to delay or consider, we have to choose and move in one direction or another. For many people who are suffering, who live in poverty, don’t have a place to live or enough to eat, every moment is lived in the tension of desperate urgency. The alternative is being immobilized by hopelessness and despair.

The gospel lesson today in Luke is about the importance of time and the urgency of Jesus’ ministry – once he began his journey to Jerusalem – and the call to oppose evil and proclaim the kingdom of God – for life in the midst of death. For we can see how every word, every moment, every act counted for Jesus, as he changed direction and set his face toward Jerusalem. He didn’t have time to wait, or to look back, or to see which way the winds were blowing.

So when Jesus stopped on his way in Samaria, the people of the village did not receive him. He was, after all, not a Samaritan, but a Jew, focused on the wrong religion – with a temple in Jerusalem, in the south – not the north! He was an outsider to them. The disciples asked Jesus what should happen to these Samaritans who rejected the Messiah. James and John had seen him transfigured on the mountain with Moses and Elijah. Would Jesus have them call down fire from heaven to destroy the whole village? But Jesus rebuked them, and went on to the next town. There just wasn’t time for this! Destruction was not his purpose.

So, on to Jerusalem! Along the way, three persons called out to Jesus, asking to follow him. The first said they would follow wherever he went – but did they know how difficult the journey would be, that there would be no place or shelter for them to stay and sleep, Jesus asked? Another wanted Jesus to wait so that he could bury his father – a reasonable request, we would agree. But again, there was no time for this – let the dead bury their own dead, Jesus said, for your job and mine is to proclaim the kingdom of God. A third person wanted to take the time to say goodbye to loved ones and friends, but Jesus said that if you are plowing a field, you cannot look back behind you, or you will go off course – such is the path Jesus forged in proclaiming the kingdom of God. Difficult words and a challenging call, to be sure. You might think that Jesus was being “insensitive”. But from now until he reached Jerusalem and was lifted up on a cross, the urgency of Jesus’ mission consumed him. There was no time to wait.

Today’s legislative process in the nation’s capitol and in our own state legislature can be terribly slow and deliberative. But sometimes the action “speeds up” in a crisis. For example, in the House of Representatives last week, the Congress was set to adjourn for the Fourth of July holiday, but then the massacre in Orlando happened, with 49 innocent people killed. As usual, no national legislation in response was expected, but a few legislators had had enough. Senators held a filibuster until the Senate held a vote on gun control bills – which, of course, failed. The Congress paused for another customary moment of silence, but after that brief moment, all hell broke loose, as Democratic legislators, led by John Lewis, asked “Where’s the bill?” Then they held an overnight sit-in on the House floor, seeking a vote on a bill barring assault rifle purchases from those on the terrorist “watch list”. An imperfect bill, to be sure – but here, perhaps, is one intended message: “No one who says a prayer and pauses for a moment of silence, without seeking to move to make a change in the present violence of our time – to help stop the killing and the easy availability of assault weapons by those who would harm others – is fit to serve as a member of Congress.” Whatever you think about their solution – the legislation they proposed to help stop gun violence, the point is that they could no longer wait to do something, they wanted to act. But of course, they were stymied again, and the Congress adjourned for the Fourth of July Holiday, because they didn’t have the votes. Action will have to wait; we don’t know how long.

Contrast this with the impatience to act which two disciples, James and John had when the people of a Samaritan village did not receive Jesus into their town. James and John wanted Jesus to bring fire down from heaven, to destroy them just like Sodom and Gomorrah, because they did not welcome him. But Jesus rebuked them, and went on to another village, on his way to Jerusalem.

Just two weeks ago, one man decided that he could not contain his anger any longer against the gay community who celebrated on Latino night in the Pulse Night Club in Orlando. He took things into his own hands, with an automatic assault rifle, killing 49 human beings and shooting another 53 before he was killed by police. His anger was kindled against gays who lived, loved and danced contrary to his mistaken beliefs about his own religion, and before he died he proclaimed his allegiance to ISIS and their false beliefs about Islam. Just as a young white man in South Carolina last year professed his mistaken beliefs, from white supremacy racist dogma, then shot and killed nine African American Christians in Mother Emanuel AME church at Bible study, because of the color of their skin. His anger and delusion overcame whatever he was taught about love for neighbor in his Lutheran confirmation class – if only he had asked Jesus what to do. In the gospel, Jesus showed the path to which God calls us, as he rebuked his disciples who wanted to punish those who didn't receive him, and instead set his direction toward Jerusalem, where he would face betrayal, arrest, trial and crucifixion. He died for the sins of everyone, offering his life, his own body for the life of the world. Jesus shows us a new way, not of revenge or retribution for the perceived errors of one another's beliefs or ways, but self-giving love, forgiveness and compassion to give life, and not death.

Twenty years ago on June 22 a group of the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The group of white supremacists quickly found themselves outnumbered by hundreds of protesters, who told them they were not welcome in this progressive college town. One of the Ku Klux Klan members, marked with an SS tattoo and wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with a confederate flag found himself separated from his comrades, on the wrong side of the fence. He was soon surrounded by hostile demonstrators, who yelled "Kill the Nazi", as they beat him with sticks. A young, African American woman named Keisha Thomas threw herself over the man, and cried out, "You can't beat goodness into him!" Someone took her photograph, which has become famous, as proof that she risked her own body to protect someone who would never do the same for her. In the moment, the crowd had lost its humanity, and Keisha's choice to act was to affirm what they had lost – humanity – her choice was to be human, to have hope. Her choice made all the difference, and saved this man from terrible injury or death. I submit that hers was a choice following Jesus, closely akin to what Jesus would do.

Today we find ourselves in the midst of partisan bickering over legislation, and division amongst ourselves over what direction our nation, and our people, should go. There are a lot of people angry with each other, or not listening to others. We even see fist-fights and shoving matches at campaign rallies.

Jesus says we don't have time for anger. Jesus would rebuke us, if we asked for revenge or retribution when we feel wronged or offended. Jesus came to show us a better way, of compassion and forgiveness, a path that leads to life.

The Church today doesn't have the luxury to take our time and look backward wistfully at what we may have lost, or thought we had. The wisdom and heritage of the Church is a good foundation, but cannot define or limit our witness in the future, whether it's our liturgy and music or the towering shadow of Martin Luther – or Martin Luther King Jr.! Jesus calls you and me today to focus on the mission at hand – plowing the furrows of God's truth with the freedom of the gospel. As the old gospel song says, *"I've got my hand on the gospel plow, won't take nothin' for my journey now. Keep your hand on the plow, hold on!"*

The Church's most urgent ministry today may be to bring diverse peoples together – from many faiths and traditions – to bring understanding and peace, in the name of Jesus Christ. We need to counteract the hate speech and anger against "others" that is so widespread today – especially in the media – with the compassion, understanding and love for neighbor that comes from Jesus. This is in our Christian tradition, of course, but is so urgent for us in our world today. We don't have time for the prejudices of the past, the parochialism of our churches, or the timidity with which we approach our witness to this gospel! Jesus calls us to be bold, courageous, and focused as we look to the future in our witness of love for neighbor, compassion, forgiveness, and sharing the peace of Christ.