

Weekend of Sunday, June 30, 2019
3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 13/Proper 8/Year C
Primary Text: Luke 9:51-62
Sermon Title: “*Focused and Single-Minded*”

Theme

Jesus is unwavering in his commitment to his mission in Jerusalem and will not be swayed by pettiness. In a series of striking cases in point, he calls his disciples to a similar single-mindedness.

Text

⁵¹When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you wherever you go.” ⁵⁸And 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.” ⁵⁹To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” ⁶¹Another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.” ⁶²Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Sermon

Once again, the Gospel Reading positions us back before the Passion of our Lord Jesus. Contextually, Jesus has already made the first prediction of his Passion in verse 22 of this same chapter, chapter 9. But his triumphal entry into Jerusalem will not happen until Chapter 19. So Luke took up ten chapters of his Gospel recording the events of the time period of Jesus actively contemplating his Passion and physically moving toward Jerusalem – a period that many Bible scholars think was about a one-year time span.

⁵¹When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Personally, the phrase that Luke used in the first verse of this passage is one of my favorites in all of scripture. I have put it in bold italics for you here. "... he set his face to go to Jerusalem." And that expression is true.

When I took the state motorcycle rider's course I was taught that I should focus my attention on where I want to go and I will go there. Shortly after Carol and I moved to the area, we had a motorcycle wreck, and as I recall the specifics of that wreck, we came across some stones in the road as we approached a 90 degree left turn. I focused on avoiding the rocks and we safely made the turn. But then, rather than returning my focus to where I wanted to go, I looked ahead of the motorcycle and saw the ditch approaching and just as the expression goes, I went to where I was focused.

This concept of focusing on where you want to go works in most life situations too. Think about this and see if you don't agree.

I've heard it said that it's really not that difficult to accumulate a million dollars. All you have to do is focus all your attention on saving as much as you can and spending as little as you can on anything that is not the focus of your life, accumulating a million dollars, and eventually you will have a million dollars.

When I was in seminary, I worked at a homeless shelter and there was a guy there who told me he had \$50,000 in the bank. How is that possible I asked? As a homeless person, he pointed out that he slept, ate and rode the city bus all for free

and worked a job and banked all the money. Of course, the quality of the life he lived and his personal stewardship would be questionable for most of us.

Those are two true examples of what I call being "Single-Minded and Focused," the title of today's sermon.

All three of the readings for today contain examples of being "Single-Minded and Focused"

In the First Reading from First Kings, the LORD told the great prophet Elijah to appoint another to be the LORD's mouthpiece, that person being Elisha. Elijah did as the LORD told him to do and upon placing the mantle of leadership on Elisha, Elisha kissed his mother and father goodbye, slaughtered his oxen and used the yoke for firewood, cooked the beef and gave it to his townsfolk. For Elisha there was no going back. He was "Single-Minded and Focused."

And in the Second Reading from Galatians, the apostle Paul, who was also a good example of being "Single-Minded and Focused," encouraged his readers in Galatia to live a lives worthy of their calling. And by that he contrasted two opposing life choices; life in the Spirit of God and life gratifying the flesh.

Life Gratifying the Flesh

¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

I would like to address the latter first. Paul wrote that a life gratifying the flesh includes behaviors like "fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these."

About all these behaviors, Paul indicated that they come from a person being a slave to the flesh. In other words, a person cannot or will not control their immoral and malicious behavior; their animal instincts.

I would like to offer two interesting points of view on human beings and whether we have animal instincts:

I recently read a story about some porn star who was rationalizing her immoral behavior as true to how human beings really are. According to her, we are just sexual animals and it is normal to enjoy as much sex as possible, with as many partners as possible, and it is American Christian conservatism that has made everything about human sexuality to be dirty.

And the second point of view comes from the psychologist Abraham Maslow, who is famous for his Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. He argued that human beings no longer have animal instincts because we have developed the ability to overcome them.

I think Paul would have agreed with Maslow. I don't think Paul would have said that human sexuality is dirty at all. I think he would have argued that while human beings are created sexual beings, and sex as a gift from God is necessarily good, God has a higher plan for human sexual relations that is above the instincts of animals.

I further think he argued in this very passage that as God-seekers and followers of Christ we are to overcome our animal instincts and rise up to our created status as

Psalm 8:5" a little lower than God's self, and crowned with glory and honor."

As I have thought about it, the person I am describing, again, one who is focused on a *Life of Gratifying the Flesh*, that person is self-absorbed and takes no one else's feelings into consideration and just does what he or she wants without regard for the other, or even in spite of the other. Most of us don't like the behavior of these people and we don't like to be around them.

But all of us have probably had our moments when we were that person to one degree or another. Thank God for God's grace, am I right?

Well, enough attention on the behavior we are to avoid. Let's turn our attention to the behavior we are supposed to adopt, what Paul described as *Life in the Spirit of God*.

Life in the Spirit of God

²²By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

In verse 22 Paul called them the "fruit of the Spirit" and listed them as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control. And he concluded the list by writing, "There is no law against such things."

Every once in a while, the media will reveal some long lost law that is now just silliness in modern society. I have one for you that you should write down or memorize.

Ohio Revised Code 2331.11 Privilege from Arrest:

(5) Persons who, on their traditional day of worship, are within, going to, or returning from their place of worship, are worshipping at a service, or are going to or returning from a service.

Ohio Revised Code 2331.11 paragraph 5 under the heading of Privilege from Arrest, states that a person is exempt from arrest if such "Persons who, on their traditional day of worship, are within, going to, or returning from their place of worship, are worshipping at a service, or are going to or returning from a service."

In other words, you cannot get busted if going to or coming from worship!

You're welcome.

Well, that was just for fun. Back to the Fruit of the Spirit. About these behaviors that we all wish were used in interactions with us, and we wished we used more often, Paul wrote, "there is *no law* against such things."

Paul further wrote,

²⁴those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

In other words, the true God seeker, the true follower of Christ, the one who truly desires to be led by the Spirit will continually try to put down our animal instincts and allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit into behaviors that honor God, or the fruit of the Spirit, as Paul called them. And at least for me, it is a lifelong struggle that I do not anticipate winning a complete victory over until after I have taken my last breath.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

So what, Pastor. What is the point? I am so glad you asked.

In the readings today, we have examples of what I call being "Single-Minded and Focused." When the great prophet Elisha was called upon to be the mouthpiece of God for God's people, he turned his back on everything else – he was "Single-Minded and Focused."

I can't imagine the weight that our Lord Jesus must have felt while he was led by the Spirit to "set his face to go to Jerusalem" but for our sake he managed because he was "Single-Minded and Focused" - "Single-Minded and Focused" on his love for us and need to save us from ourselves.

What are we supposed to do and how are we supposed to do it, you ask? More great questions!

God revealed in Jesus Christ could not love us more or give us a greater gift than eternal life if we lived a spotless life – that is not the point. That is simply God's loving nature and the free unmerited gift of grace.

But if our goal is to become more like Jesus and eventually meet him face to face, and that should be every Christian's goal, then we ought to be "Single-Minded and Focused" on him and his example, and put down our animal instinct to gratify the flesh, and live in the Spirit of God.

This week, I would encourage you to re-read the Second Reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians, and put his practical advice into practice in your lives.

Prayer

Sovereign God, you indeed desire to be the ruler of all hearts, and you call us to obey you, and if we would allow ourselves to be guided by your Spirit you give us true freedom. Keep us faithful to the ways of your Son, that, leaving behind all that hinders us, we may steadfastly follow your paths. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen